25¢ FALL

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

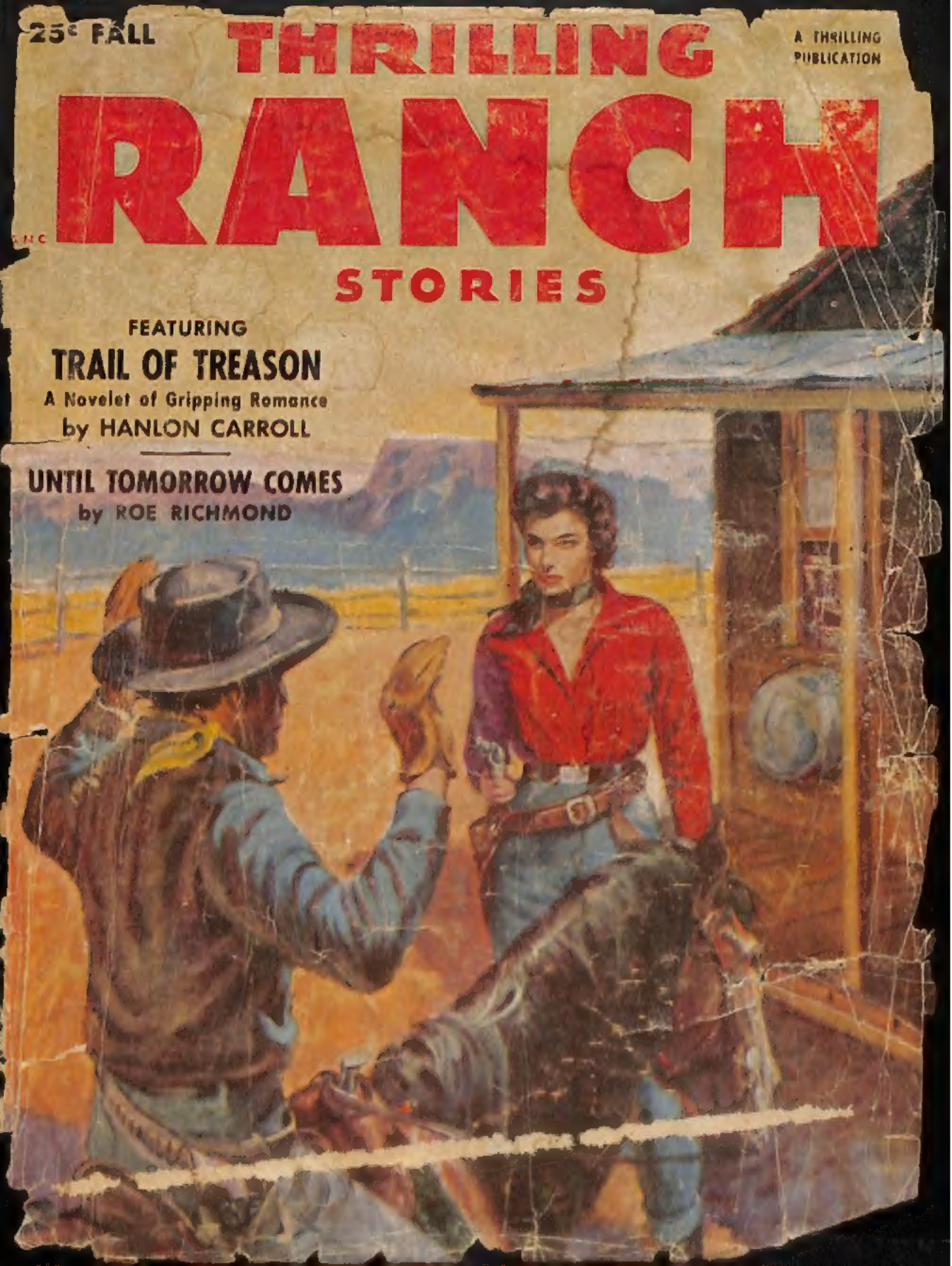
TRAIL OF TREASON

A Novelet of Gripping Romance

by HANLON CARROLL

UNTIL TOMORROW COMES

by ROE RICHMOND



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1st Prize $15,000

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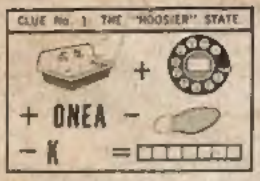
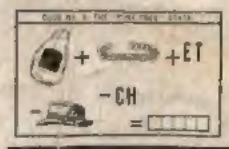


You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. [illegible] is done you are left with [illegible] is the Hoosier State. [illegible] blocks with Clue No. 1.

Fun? Yes! Now Solve This Typical Contest Puzzle



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You owe it to yourself to try to stop money worries and GET ON THE ROAD TO SECURITY. And here's your opportunity. For the price of a postage stamp, we will send you FREE the Entry Form, the Official Rules, the First Series of Puzzles — EVERYTHING you need to enter. So make up your mind now — decide to win! Get the facts and MAIL COUPON TODAY!!

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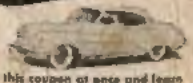

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Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dobmeier, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back on NRI textbooks for information."

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week and more EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how. Tester you build with kits I send helps you make extra money servicing sets, gives practical experience on circuits common to Radio and Television. All equipment is yours to keep.

2. GOOD PAY JOB

NRI Courses lead to these and many other jobs: Radio and TV service, P.A., Auto Radio, Lab, Factory, and Electronic Controls Technicians, Radio and TV Broadcasting, Police, Ship and Airways Operators and Technicians. Opportunities are increasing. The United States has over 105 million Radios—over 2,900 Broadcasting Stations—more expansion is on the way.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 15,000,000 TV sets are now in use; 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized . . . many of them expected to be in operation in 1953. This means more jobs—good pay jobs with bright futures. More operators, installation service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful future in TV! Find out what Radio and TV offer you.

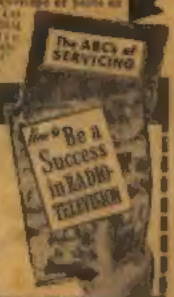
You Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing With Kits I Send

This Is Just Some of the Equipment My Students Build. All Parts Yours to Keep.

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION Technicians. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You also get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. Pictured at left, are just a few of the pieces of equipment you build with kits of parts I send. You experiment with, learn circuits common to Radio and Television.

Mail Coupon—find out what RADIO-TELEVISION Can Do for You

Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual Servicing Lesson, shows how you learn at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Send coupon in envelope or paste on penny postcard. MAIL NOW! J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 39th Year



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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XLVI No. 1 | A THRILLING PUBLICATION | Fall, 1953

An Exciting Novel

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Devlin's job was to bring to justice a deadly ring of traitors—though the girl he loved was one of them!

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FANNY ELLSWORTH, *Editor*

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

How long since your last raise?

Sure, you've had a "cost of living increase." But what about the *big* pay boost?—the kind the boss asks you not to talk about and the kind that starts you thinking about a new car, a better home, luxuries for your family!

If you've had one of these in the past six months, stop reading right here. If not, it's time to start doing something about it.

Look around you. The men who are advancing are the trained men. They've learned special skills that bring them higher pay. It's the men without training who get what's left.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and hope for the jackpot to pay off? If you really want the *big money*, you can start by getting the necessary training at home in your spare time.

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YEAR OF THE SIX MILLIONTH STUDENT

Name _____ Age _____ Home Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____ Working Hours _____ A.M. to _____ P.M.

Occupation _____

Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

LIKE to write short poems or anecdotes, or draw cartoons? If you do this department is designed for you.

It will consist of contributions from our readers. Our only requirements are that you be an amateur writer or artist—not a professional—and that the work you submit be entirely your own. For each contribution that we use we shall pay $2.00. We cannot enter into correspondence concerning contributions, nor can we return unused material.

WARNING!

An Eastern man went out West
Its wonderful sights to see.
As a cowboy he dressed, for
That's what he wanted to be.

But beneath some tall trees
He built a fine fire
Never thought of a breeze;
Soon he lay down to retire.

Suddenly he awoke. All round him was smoke
And flames, rising higher and higher
Beauty—he'd killed: built his own funeral pyre
Alas! He'd started a forest fire!

Mrs. Oella C. Webster
Kirkwood, St. Louis, Mo.

JACKPOT!

Ever hear of a "typical family" who hit a jackpot? A couple from Indianola, Iowa, with two children, happened to arrive here during Plum Creek Days, and they all were put up in a hotel, supplied with Western attire, and given $1,500 in gifts. They were the stars of the show, and in the words of the wife and mother: "This has been unbelievable. It's like a dream."

James Ryan
Lexington, Nebr.

PARADISE

Little boy, vacation-bound,
Where is this paradise you've found;
You who know the city ways
Her blistering pavements, traffic maze;
School is out—you're on your way,
Out to Grandpa's ranch, you say!

Oh the magic of those words—
Cowboys, ponies, cattle herds,
Calves and colts and baby chicks,
A dog that does all sorts of tricks;
A cow to milk at close of day!
On Grandpa's ranch they're making hay!

A yellow moon, so big and bright,
Floats through a million stars at night;
A meadowlark at break of dawn
Awakens you with cheery song!
Already starts another day
On Grandpa's ranch Montana way!

Jean Brenneman
Hysham, Mont.

LUCKY ANGLER

Out here in Pilot Rock, where the fish don't look too hard at what they're biting, a little 6-year-old snagged a nice-sized trout recently. Happened she was out with a bunch of grown-ups who carried a lot of scientific fishing gear—and who could spare only pieces of worms for the little girl. But

at the end of the day she'd put them all to shame . . . and as my grandpa often said, "Fish don't care who eats 'em."

Joe Granger
Pilot Rock, Ore.

HIGH-STEPPING BABY

Streamlined and fast—that's my little baby.
High-spirited, but mindful of her duty.
Her walk is proud and her head held high
I hear murmurs of approval as we pass by.

She can captivate a crowd if she takes the notion
By doing the rumba in real slow motion
She gets all my attention and loving care
My own little high-stepping palomino mare.

C. F. Daut
Redding, Calif.

SIXGUN JACK McRANDALL

A drumming of hooves on the narrow trail,
A flashing glimpse of mane and tail
And a speeding rider is lost to sight
In the gloomy darkness of the night.

And ever and anon the rider turns to jeer
The speeding pursuers in his rear
And the screaming whine of leaden hail,
Is heard upon the narrow trail.

The flash of pistols split the dark
And the leaden pellets find their mark.
The fleeing rider is seen to fall
But out of the dark there comes a call—

"Come on you dirty rotten scum!
I've twelve more bullets in my gun
And twelve of you shall die with me
So I shall not lack for company."

Then dropping flat upon the ground
They answered his fire, round for round.
And thus died Sixgun Jack McRandall
Who sure was worthy of his handle.

For his bullets killed twelve men you see
And he did not lack for company.

Edward F. Goetz
St. Louis, Mo.

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

"I know," says Major Barber, "that you realize what hard jobs our men are doing in America's armed forces. Maybe you *haven't* realized that you're *helping* those men — whenever you invest in Defense Bonds. For Bonds strengthen our economy — to produce the arms and food and care that make our men secure."

Peace is for the strong! For peace and prosperity save with U. S. Defense Bonds!

Now E Bonds pay 3%! Now, improved Series E Bonds start paying interest after 6 months. And average 3% interest, compounded semiannually when held to maturity! Also, all *maturing* E Bonds automatically *go on* earning—at the new rate—for 10 *more* years. Today, start investing in U. S. Series E Defense Bonds through the Payroll Savings Plan at work.

all the glamor of hollywood unreeled for you in one exciting magazine!

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FILL OUT AND MAIL THIS COUPON RIGHT NOW

SCREENLAND Plus TV-LAND
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TRS-11

Yes! I want to take advantage of SCREENLAND Plus TV-LAND'S Special Offer — 10 Months for Only $1. Here's my dollar.

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ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ ZONE_____ STATE_____

THE STINGING KILLER

Here are some frightening facts about the desert's Public Enemy Number One

LITTLE Pablo Garcia skipped across the Arizona desert in back of his adobe home, his nimble brown feet avoiding the sharp cactus spines. A greenish bright lizard sped from beneath a meager greasewood bush, its tail held high over its back. Pablo, laughing, gave chase.

The lizard took refuge in a pile of rocks, and Pablo's brown fingers moved the rocks aside. Abruptly he jerked his hand back, a short scream coming from him. His eyes grew large as he saw the reddish, many-legged creature move under another rock, its long tail curled warningly over its back. It was a scorpion, one of the desert's deadly denizens.

Pablo's cry brought his mother from the house. She knew at once what was wrong and she trembled with fear. Once before she had lost a child from the sting of a scorpion. Murmuring a prayer, she carried Pablo to the house, sending an older boy to fetch a neighbor who had a car.

In a short time Pablo was in a Mesa hospital. He was in a state of great nervousness, shaking, and clawing at his lips—the typical reactions from the sting of the deadly species of the scorpion. The boy was fortunate, however, for at the hospital he was given an injection of scorpion antivenom, and his life saved. A few years earlier he might have died, for it has been only in recent years that much has been learned about the scorpion's sting.

Most people, when asked what they consider the most dangerous of the desert's wildlife creatures, will say the rattlesnake. But this is far from the truth. The scorpion is Public Enemy Number One, particularly the small varieties which grow to be little over an inch in length. In one survey that was made in Texas over a nine-year period, it was found that out of fifty deaths due to bites and stings, thirty-four were scorpion stings, and only eight the result of rattlesnake bites.

Scientists reveal that better than six hundred kinds of scorpions have been identified the world over. The Southwest has its share of this number, with more than twenty species found in Texas. There is one type which reaches a length of five inches, but this big fellow is comparatively harmless. Its sting is no more dangerous or painful than that of a bumblebee.

As with the bees and wasps, many people think that the scorpion bites. It stings with a needle-sharp stinger on the tip of the tail. The poison sack is also located in the tail. The creature has pincers at the head of the body which it uses to hold its prey—usually insects and spiders—while the stinger injects its paralyzing poison.

The habitat of scorpions is usually a rock crevice, under rocks or under boards. They are likely to be found in the cracks of adobe walls and under the bark of trees or old logs. Certain species will migrate into the husks of corn. They are night feeders, so in the daytime they may seek shelter any place that is handy—including the folds of clothing and in shoes. It is a wise desert traveler who shakes out his clothing and shoes before putting them on!

Study has revealed that the sting of the poisonous scorpion will not swell around the wound, nor will it turn as blue-black as with the non-poisonous types. Also, the latter's bite will not bring extreme nervousness or convulsions.

There are a number of precautions and first-aid suggestions which desert travelers should know. First, stay away from the known habitats of the scorpion; be careful about putting hands under rocks or into crevices; shake out all clothing and shoes before dressing. If one is stung, ice should be applied as soon as possible. If the sting is on the hand, as most of them are, the hand should be immersed in ice water for a couple of minutes, removed for a minute and then re-immersed.

Ice water seems to dissipate the poison and gives the body a chance to counteract it. Often, if the sting is not near a nerve center, this ice treatment will suffice and an antivenom will not be necessary. If ice water isn't available—a very likely prospect on the desert—cold water is helpful. The victim should be kept quiet and taken to a physician as soon as possible. Above all, give this deadly little desert denizen due respect. His tail is loaded!

——Ferris Weddle

Devlin's job was to bring to justice a deadly ring of traitors—though the girl he loved was one of them

Trail of Treason

A Novel by HANLON CARROLL

I

Traitor Suspect

IT WAS too hot for the second week in April, and the hills that cradled the pueblo of Los Angeles on its wide plain that stretched away to the blue Pacific were a sere and sickly yellow in the early morning light.

But if Lieutenant Kern Devlin, 4th Cavalry, California Volunteers, saw the burnt hills beneath the dusty live oaks, or the buzzards wheeling in the brassy blue of the sky, it was only as ill omens.

This would be consistent with the worry and uncertainty that had clung to his thoughts on this four-week patrol like the odor of rottenness on the wind that whispered down the ravines over the carcasses of cattle killed by this year of drought.

He'd been pushing A Troop since dawn, and now he found himself resenting the need to halt them at the foot of the last rise that lay between them and the town, with the order to dismount and lead. Found himself resenting the four-week-old daily argument between troopers O'Hare and Timmons as to whether the war would be over by now if the Volunteers had been sent East two years ago in '61.

"Don't be a fool, Timmons," O'Hare was saying. "You know as well as I do the California Volunteers are all that keeps the Rebs from seizing the State. Los Angeles is crawling with 'em. Why, I'll bet even that pretty little waitress at the Pepper Tree Inn is a Secesh!"

Kern turned his back on the roar of laughter that followed. O'Hare's words had hit too close to the fear that was gnawing at him, and leading the roan, he started up-trail with impatient booted stride. Reaching the top far ahead of the men, he stood looking down on the flat roofs of the buildings set on high ground across the trickle of river below. He was a good looking young man for all the trouble in his dark eyes, tall and broad-shouldered, with the lean-hipped grace of the cavalryman. His hair, damp from the heat, shone dark and curly in the sun as he took off his hat and put the glasses from his saddle case on the town.

Here and there smoke rose thinly in the still air from the low buildings around the Plaza. On the north side, the whitewashed tower of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels stood serene in the morning sun, and just there—near the corner of Arcadia and Los Angeles Streets—was the store of Mike Calhoun. So far as he could tell there was no activity around the store. But then, of course, it was early.

Kern lowered the glasses, staring thoughtfully down at the town. Part of his worry had been in not meeting big red-bearded Mike and his wagons somewhere along the trail. With this thriving store in Los Angeles and a warehouse Kern had heard he'd acquired, Mike and his boy, Jeb, were nearly always on their way early in the month, freighting supplies to the sutlers' stores at Fort Yuma and Fort Mojave farther up the Colorado. But this time there'd been no sign of them, and that was strange. But the greatest part of his worry . . .

ABRUPTLY Kern raised the glasses to his eyes again, aware that his hands were shaking. He'd thought there had been a quick movement at the front of the store—a movement that might have been made by light, voluminous skirts—that might have been Penny Calhoun. Eighteen-year-old Penny whose slender, gloved hands could manage the six-mule team of a freighter as expertly as a man. Spirited little Penny who would argue at the drop of the hat for an ideal she believed in. Lovely little Penny with her burnished copper hair and saucy nose, with her oddly uptilted amber eyes that never told what she was really thinking. Sweet little Penny with the softly laughing red lips that he had kissed the night of the fandango a month ago when he had asked her to marry him.

"Kern, I—I don't know what to tell you," she had whispered, and the red lips had trembled in half promise close to his. "I hadn't thought much about marrying, yet."

Then the tawny eyes had looked into his, and he would have sworn she was sincere.

"I won't say no, Kern," she'd murmured, "but—let me think on it a while, will you?"

And that was no answer at all, but he might have contented himself with it because he loved her, if it hadn't been for the thing that happened fifteen minutes later. The thing that had set the ferment of doubt working in his soul and made him completely miserable.

Searching the crowd of dancers for Penny, he had finally found her. She'd been laughing with Rand Blakeslee, editor of the pro-Confederate *Planet*, as they strolled out to the patio. That was a little thing in itself, but when they returned, Penny's cheeks had been flushed and she'd raised nervously exploring fingers to her burnished, glowing

hair as though afraid it was in disarray. And Kern had been as sure as though he'd seen it happen that Blakeslee had kissed her.

But the thing that had clawed at his heart, cutting deeper than any jealousy could, was the ugly, insinuating suspicion that lay back of the question he'd asked himself many times: how was it that Penny, who loyally carded lint and knitted socks for the Sanitary Commission, was on such intimate terms with Rand Blakeslee who, everyone said, was a Southern sympathizer? It just didn't make any sense—Rand Blakeslee and lovely, copper-haired Penny Calhoun. Or was Copperhead a better word for her, too?

Savagely, Kern ripped the memory of that evening from his mind. The sooner he went to her and asked for the truth, the better. He turned to Sergeant Hitchcock, who waited at a respectful distance, cap squarely on his towhead, blue eyes carefully blank.

"Mount the troop, Sergeant," he snapped. "When we top the bench across the river, take them into town at the trot. And put some vinegar into it!"

Then he swung up on the roan and led the way.

You'd never know, Kern often thought, whether Major Woodworth liked you or not. There was no way of telling either from his manner or his face. The manner was at once as disciplined as Regulations and as casual as the frayed cigar that was eternally clamped between his thin lips. The face, with its narrow hawk nose and sharp chin, might have been carved in granite. The hair and eyes were gray.

Yet Kern was certain that the post commander liked him. Long after the troop was dismissed on liberty in the post yard and Kern had made his report, the major had been disposed to chat, even strolling over to bachelor officers' quarters with him and prowling about the wash room while Kern splashed in the zinc trough that served as a tub.

THERE was something on the Old Man's mind and Kern thought he could guess at its nature. Probably because he had soldiered in Mexico with Kern Devlin Sr., Woodworth had, on several occasions since the elder Devlin's death, taken it upon himself to offer Kern fatherly advice. Toweling himself vigorously now, Kern was certain that this was another such occasion.

At last it came. "Going to see a girl, I take it?" growled Woodworth.

"That's right, sir." Kern got into a fresh shirt and began buttoning it.

"None of my business, of course, but would it be Miss Calhoun?"

"Yes, sir." The prying old coot, thought Kern. Then something balled into a hard knot in the pit of his stomach. Was it possible that the major was suspicious of Penny too?

Woodworth took a turn about the room and stopped in front of him, hands clasped behind his back.

"Are you in love with her, Kern?" he asked quietly.

His nerves already raw from weeks of worry, Kern didn't answer for a moment, staring at the major in bitter silence. How could he explain what he felt for Penny, or what he hoped to find out by seeing her? Then he found his voice, but he couldn't keep the angry challenge out of it.

"And if I *am* in love with her, sir?"

Woodworth stared back at him for a moment, his jaws tight on his cigar.

"Nothing," he said, and making a parade-ground turn, he walked out of the room.

There were two horses at the hitch-rack when Kern dismounted before the Calhoun store. The doors stood open now beneath the wooden awning, and as Kern stepped into the cool dimness, the familiar odor of the place that was a blend of spice, leather, tobacco and freshly-ground coffee assailed his nostrils. Then he saw Penny behind the counter, waiting on a customer. Her dress was soft pink. She looked pale, he thought; there were shadows under the tawny eyes as they met his in the briefest look of recognition. Then she went on chatting with the customer.

His eyes completely used to the dimness now, Kern swiveled to see Rand Blakeslee lounging against a packing case in the corner, and was aware that Blakeslee's pale eyes, narrowed against the smoke of the cigarillo he held in well kept white fingers,

had been silently appraising him.

"Welcome back to the City of the Angels, Lieutenant," drawled Blakeslee, the thin line of dark mustache he affected stretching above his narrow white teeth in what might have been a smile. "Been gone about a month, haven't you?" he asked, the white fingers flicking ash from his left lapel. The buttonhole, Kern saw, had a small, neatly mended tear in its corner, and the ash clung to its ridge.

Kern gave him a curt nod, and Blakeslee added significantly, "A lot of things can happen in a month, Lieutenant."

It was the way he said it that made Kern step toward him, all the simmering jealousy and uncertainty of the past weeks coming to a sudden boil within him.

"What are you driving at, Blakeslee?" he demanded harshly.

"Nothing that need make you angry, Kern!" Suddenly Penny was there between them, the customer gone, and Penny's cool hand lay on his. "You—you're looking well, Kern," she said a little stiffly.

Kern looked down at her, down into the tawny golden eyes, and the old melting helplessness was on him making him forget everything but her loveliness and his longing to take her in his arms.

"I'VE WORRIED about you folks, Penny—about Mike," he said softly. "How is it that I didn't meet him on the trail?"

She stepped away from him then, sudden anger burning in her pale cheeks.

"I thought *you'd* know about Mike," she said coldly.

"Penny—what's wrong?" he demanded. For the first time he didn't grin at the way Mike's motherless daughter called him by his first name.

"Mike has disappeared," she said succinctly. "One day almost a month ago he started for the warehouse where he was to meet Jeb. But Jeb says he never got there. We haven't seen him since."

"You reported it to the sheriff?" Kern asked quickly.

Penny gave him a scornful look. "Of course," she retorted. "But what can he do when the Army is at the bottom of it? I went straight to Major Woodworth when it happened, but he claimed to know nothing of Mike's whereabouts."

Kern stared at her in bewilderment. "Why should Major Woodworth—" he began, then shook his head. "Look, Penny," he said, "maybe you'd better go back and start at the beginning. I've been away—remember?"

"Kern, you needn't pretend ignorance!" she said furiously. "Surely you must know the Army has been watching us for weeks. They're the only ones who could have grabbed Mike. He had no enemies. They must be holding him someplace—why, I don't know."

Her lovely lips trembled and suddenly she covered her face with her hands. "I'm getting so tired of being hounded and spied on and followed!" she choked, "and all because we lived in Virginia before we came out here!"

His whole impulse was to comfort her, and Kern stepped forward, but Blakeslee was already at her side, a proprietary arm about her waist.

Swift anger flamed hotly in Kern. He spoke to Penny, but his words were meant for Blakeslee.

"Aren't you a little mixed up, Penny?" he asked harshly. "In the first place, the Army is not holding Mike—they don't operate that way, though I can guess who told you they do. And if they *are* investigating you, it's not because you came from Virginia—it's probably because of the company you keep!"

Instantly she sprang forward to stand before him like a small, golden-eyed tigress.

"If you're talking about Rand Blakeslee," she cried, "let me tell you something: his paper is working for the thing this whole country is praying for—peace! An end to this awful war—an end to killing, and hate, and suspicion!"

Kern stared at her, wondering if she honestly believed what she was saying.

"Everyone wants to see the war end," he said soberly, "but peace talk used as propaganda is an old trick. The Trojans used a wooden horse. The idea is, you talk peace while you look for a chance to stab your

enemy in the back when he's not looking."

"Maybe I'm the one you should be saying these things to, Devlin!"

Kern saw murder in Blakeslee's pale blue eyes, saw his right arm sweep Penny back out of the way. But he didn't see his left until it was too late. Blakeslee brought it up from the floor, and it caught Kern on the side of the jaw with a smashing impact that sent him sprawling backward into a row of flour barrels against the far wall.

For a moment the room spun dizzily, and Kern thought he heard Penny scream. Then he looked up to see Blakeslee flinging himself down at him, and twisting aside, he rolled to his feet as Blakeslee went down on one knee.

But Blakeslee was up again instantly, and swinging. Those deceptively soft-looking hands could land a solid punch, and Kern took a rough one in the stomach before he had his chance. In a split second that Blakeslee's guard was down, Kern brought a right with everything he had in it to the point of Blakeslee's chin, and the editor went down like a poleaxed steer.

Then Penny was down on the floor cradling Rand's head in her lap, and when she looked up at Kern her face was like chalk.

"What are you waiting for?" she said, her voice low and choked. "There's nothing for you here any more, Kern. Get out!"

NUMBLY, Kern picked up his hat and, still breathing hard, walked to the door. Flattened against its frame was a tall, red-haired young man little more than a boy, and as he brushed past him, Kern caught the strong, raw odor of whisky. Looking full into the boy's face, Kern felt shock go through him as he saw that it was Jeb Calhoun. Jeb, who never used to touch a drop! His eyes—the same tawny amber as Penny's—were watching Rand Blakeslee struggle to his feet, and as Kern stepped into the glare of the sunlit street he thought, that kid is scared about something.

Then, in a delayed reaction, the full impact of what had happened in the store hit him, and Penny's words echoed through his aching heart as he knew they would echo there in all the empty days ahead: "There's nothing for you here any more, Kern."

He was still in the dark about one thing he'd come to find out—the question of Penny's loyalty. Was she actually a Copperhead, or had her idealistic nature tricked her into accepting Rand Blakeslee's false doctrine of peace at any price? Somehow it didn't seem to matter very much now. Because one thing he did know—Penny wanted no part of him now or ever again. . . .

He hadn't noticed the US on the saddle blanket of the horse next to his until he caught the unmistakable odor of a familiar cigar in the air and turned with the reins in his hand to face the flinty gray eyes of Major Woodworth

"We can talk about it on the way back to the post," said the major tersely.

With bleak face, Kern backed his own mount and swung into the saddle.

"I suppose you saw what happened?" he said as they turned south on Los Angeles Street.

"Most of it," said Woodworth shortly.

"And fisticuffs, of course, come under the heading of conduct unbecoming an officer, and would call for a court martial," groaned Kern.

"Were there fisticuffs?" inquired Woodworth blandly. "I didn't notice."

They had come to the post yard, and turning the horses over to an orderly, the major motioned Kern into his office. Indicating a chair, he seated himself behind his desk.

"Kern, are you still in love with that girl?" Woodworth shot the question at him for the second time that day.

His lips tight, his dark eyes downcast, Kern slowly beat fist into palm.

"I—don't know, sir," he muttered miserably.

"Well, don't be!" snapped Woodworth. "Because I'm as sure as I'm sitting here that that little lady is mixed up in one of the hottest rebel plots we've had around here in a long time!"

Kern looked up quickly.

"I wanted to warn you about her this morning, boy," Woodworth's rough tone was almost kindly for a moment, "but I thought you wouldn't believe me. You see, I didn't know whether you knew of her friendship with Blakeslee or not."

"I had a rough idea," muttered Kern.

Woodworth shot him a keen look. "You didn't mention that this morning. The point is, Miss Calhoun's friendship with Blakeslee makes her suspect because Blakeslee may be the big wheel back of the plot I spoke of. We think he's been contacting Rebel agents in Northern California and Nevada on something pretty big, but so far we've no proof. We've nothing against him except that his paper continually discredits the Administration and cries for peace. He hangs around the Calhoun store a lot and I thought if you banged into him there things might come to a head. They did."

KERN DRUMMED savagely on the arms of his chair, and his tone was bitterly mocking as he said, "So you think, sir, that with the help of Miss Penny Calhoun, the Rebels are trying to seize California?"

"The Rebels have been trying to seize California since before the war," snapped Woodworth, "but I don't lie awake nights worrying about that—they haven't got what it takes to seize and hold territory out here, even if Southern California is crawling with Southern sympathizers. No, this is something else—gold."

Woodworth got to his feet and began to pace the narrow office.

"The Confederacy is desperate, Kern. They're hungry and barefoot and broke. They'll do anything to get their hands on gold to keep the war going. And, damn it, they've been getting it through their California agents! We know that a closely knit organization must be doing it, but so far we've been unable to find out anything about its leaders, its membership, or where it meets."

The major returned to his chair and folded his hands on top of his desk

"Actually the thing goes back six or eight months before we got into it," he began. "Seems that Washoe County, Nevada, had been losing one shipment of gold dust after another to a highwayman who had the infernal gall to leave a receipt for the gold in the Wells Fargo box signed 'Captain Dixie, C.S.A.' Some of the gold was intercepted when Southern agents tried to ship it from San Francisco, but Captain Dixie continued to operate. Washoe authorities appealed to Washington, and Lafayette Baker sent them one of his agents. Fellow named Brant."

The major cleared his throat, then went on. "Brant baited a trap with a record shipment of dust. Captain Dixie took the bait and was shot and killed. But the other riders with him got away with the gold. Brant traced it to Los Angeles and came to me with his story the day after you left on patrol. Brant nosed around a while without saying much; then the afternoon of the second day he seemed quite excited about something, but all he would tell me was that he had the local agents pegged and would I be waiting with twenty men in the river bottom near warehouse row at eleven that night. I was there, but he didn't show up. Because earlier that evening he'd been murdered in his room at the Bella Union. Stabbed."

Woodworth threw up his hands. "All I could do was notify Washington and ask for another agent. But it seems that the Washington bureau has its hands full right now and is turning all such investigations over to local military commanders. So I'm holding the sack."

Kern stirred restlessly, and spoke for the first time since Woodworth started his story.

"Just how, sir, does all this tie up to the dainty apron strings of Miss Penny Calhoun?"

Instead of answering directly, Woodworth got up and went to the wall map.

"We know the gold arrived in Los Angeles," he said. "Brant traced it this far. But they've got to get it out. There's no way they can ship it by sea. We've got 'em covered by Drum Barracks—here. And by Fort Latham at Ballona Estuary—here.

"That means they've got to take it out in wagons—probably by the overland trail to Texas," murmured Kern.

"That's right," Woodworth agreed, "but to go beyond the eastern border of California at Fort Yuma where the ferry is, they've got to show a passport signed by the Commander of the Department of the Pacific. Of the local freight outfits with passports, one has just gone out of business. A second one has been sending his wagons north for the last month or two—"

Kern felt himself half dragged toward the horse

"And that leaves the Calhouns," Kern finished gloomily.

"That leaves Penny Calhoun," snapped Woodworth. "Mike is missing, and Jeb is usually too drunk to drive a wagon these days, so who do you think is going to take that shipment of gold past the inspectors at Yuma?"

"How do you know they haven't smuggled it through by some other means?" countered Kern.

WE'VE SEARCHED every saddlebag and every vehicle that's gone through Yuma for the last three weeks. So far this month Calhoun's wagons haven't been through—probably because he knows we're watching. But I'm sure it's his freight outfit that's been elected to smuggle that gold. They are probably counting on Miss Penny's charm to help get it through. And you're the lad who is going to bring me proof!"

Kern stared at Woodworth, his dark eyes miserable. "Sir," he began, "I've never had an intelligence detail—"

"Neither have any of the rest of us," barked Woodworth, "but Washington says it's our baby, so I guess we'll have to walk the floor with it."

Opening a drawer, he slapped a leather dispatch case onto his desk and pushed it toward Kern.

"Brant's room had been ransacked, but luckily he'd left his reports with me. Maybe he had a premonition his number was up when he got that close to the truth. Anyway, this is all we've got to go on. I can't give you any specific orders except to watch every move the Calhouns make and report back to me. If their wagons leave town take A Troop and follow. I'll give you every cooperation."

Woodworth rose and extended his hand. "I guess that's about it, boy. Except—good luck!"

"Thank you, sir." Kern took the hand and, dispatch case under his arm, was almost out the door when Woodworth's voice stopped him.

"Oh, Kern!"

Devlin turned. Woodworth's craggy face had never looked grimmer.

"I suppose you realize," he said, "that you may be faced with the necessity of arresting Miss Calhoun as a Confederate spy?"

Kern felt as though someone had just landed another solid punch in the vicinity of his stomach. He went a little white around the mouth, but his blue-clad shoulders lifted.

"There was an oath that went with the uniform, sir," he said quietly. "I won't forget it."

He went out into the hot April sunshine, and crossing the cobbled yard to BOQ, closed the door slowly behind him. He was committed now—committed to investigating an enemy plot that had already cost the life of a government agent. And it looked as though the trail of treason was going to lead him straight to the girl he knew he still loved.

Kern spent an hour with Brant's reports, finding little that Woodworth hadn't already told him. There was one thing—a penciled marginal note which said, "check *Planet* advertising for K.P.S."

Who or what was K.P.S.? Puzzling over the meaning of Brant's cryptic notation, Kern made a mental note of his own to drop in to the *Planet* office during the noon hour when Blakeslee would probably be out, and see if he could find the answer.

Picking up his hat, Kern started for the stables. Then he paused to draw his watch from his pocket. Eleven-fifteen. That would give him more than enough time to go over to the Bella Union first. There was nothing of the morbid in Kern, but he found himself wanting to see the room Brant had occupied—and been killed in—three weeks ago.

II

Baptism of Fire

THE BELLA UNION was Los Angeles' principal hotel, but it was not a hostelry of which the town could be proud. A long, low adobe structure, it buzzed with flies and reeked of unwashed blankets and the smell of the stables at the rear.

"How many times have you rented this room since Mr. Brant occupied it?" Kern, halting in the long corridor behind the day clerk, waited for the man to turn the key in number eight. Until Kern had casually clinked some silver dollars together between his palms, the sallow-skinned clerk had been very reluctant to show the room, and now he turned a doleful face on Kern.

"Only once, Lieutenant. A drummer from Massachusetts. He stayed just two hours before he heard about the—about what had happened here; then he left. It's been dreadful for business, and the Indian help won't come near this room to clean it."

Kern could believe that. The bed sheets, like the towels on the rack by the washstand, were limp and grimy-looking. And the sun, coming through the ragged curtain over the fly-specked window, spotlighted the fuzzy gray dust piled up in the corner by the wardrobe.

Kern examined the low window. It was barred on the outside by an iron guard common to the Spanish architecture of the town. Obviously no one could have entered that way. Brant's killer must necessarily have come through the door. But had he entered by invitation, or had he crept in before Brant and hidden in the corner by the wardrobe?

Kern's eyes flicked back to that corner. Under the probing light of the sun, something bright gleamed beneath the dust. Stooping to pick it up, Kern cleaned it between thumb and forefinger and laid it on the palm of his hand. It was a tiny metal replica of a Confederate flag, and judging from the ragged welt of solder on its back, it had been knocked or ripped from its original anchorage with considerable violence.

"Ever see one of these before?" Kern thrust his open palm toward the clerk, who regarded the flag with bored indifference.

"Can't say that I have, sir," he sniffed, "though there may be hundreds of 'em around, what with all the Copperheads we have in town."

Kern slipped the bit of metal into his pocket, thanked the clerk, and strode down the corridor and out into the cleaner air of the street.

His first reaction at finding the emblem had been one of elation. It was unlikely that the drummer from Massachusetts would have owned such a thing. And since no one else had occupied the room since Brant's death, the tiny flag could have been dropped there by his murderer.

But Kern's elation was short-lived. As the clerk had pointed out, there might be hundreds of such flags around town. The legislature had made it a misdemeanor to display Rebel flags or devices, but it was being done just the same, with stealth. As for finding the one man—or woman—in Los Angeles who had dropped this particular flag, it would be like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

AWARE suddenly that he hadn't eaten since dawn, Kern went into the little café next to the hotel for a quick meal. Then, leaving his mount tied at the Bella Union hitch-rail, he walked slowly toward the shopping district, still puzzling the significance of the little flag. The feeling was strong in him that it should tie in with some fact he already knew, but the specific fact continued to elude him.

So deep was his preoccupation that he had jarred the arm of a small, feminine figure in the throng of shoppers and raised his hat in apology before he realized that it was Penny Calhoun.

She had changed to a dress of some thin, light green stuff printed with rosebuds, and there were gay little roses on her straw bonnet, but the amber eyes that looked up from under its brim were dark with anger.

"You're not very subtle, are you, Kern?" she said coldly. "If you must follow me I suppose you must; but you may as well realize once and for all that you and I have nothing to say to each other!"

"You made that quite clear this morning," he said stiffly, and saw that it was no use explaining that this meeting had been an accident.

"Penny, how long has Jeb been drinking?" He shot the question at her suddenly. To his amazement, he saw the force of her anger go out of her, saw the color drain from her face.

"So you noticed the condition he was in

this morning." The words were hardly more than a whisper under the straw bonnet, and Kern thought he detected shame in them, and something that might have been fear.

She looked up at him then and the amber eyes were tragic. "It's been going on for over a month," she said. "I tried to cover up for him at first, but I guess everybody knows by now—"

Penny swayed a little, and alarmed by her pallor, Kern put a hand under her elbow to steady her, but she pulled away.

"I'm all right," she protested.

"Just the same, I think you'd better sit down for a minute," he said firmly, and suddenly docile, she allowed him to lead her to a tree-shaded table in the patio of an open-air Mexican café.

"Kern, I've been half out of my mind with worry these past few weeks," she said when they were seated and he had ordered iced *limonada*. "Between Mike's disappearance and Jeb—" Penny put a slim hand to her forehead. "Kern, Jeb's been acting so strangely, almost as though he felt—guilty about something. He drinks himself into a stupor every night, and it makes him so ugly I'm afraid of what he may do."

She raised her shoulders in a gesture of hopelessness. "Mike tried to straighten him out, but every time he talked to Jeb it wound up in a quarrel. They had a terrible row the day before Mike disappeared—"

"Penny," interrupted Kern sharply, "you don't think there could be any connection between that quarrel and Mike's disappearance?"

She looked at him with slowly widening eyes, as though the possibility had never occurred to her before.

"No," she said faintly. "Oh no! Jeb wouldn't—he couldn't—"

Suddenly she buried her face in her hands. "Oh Kern, I don't know what to think any more! I don't know whom I can trust, whom I can turn to."

Kern looked at the pathetically drooping shoulders, at the bowed red head in its straw bonnet, and even while the picture tugged at his sympathy he found himself remembering the whiplash hurt of her words in the store this morning, and wondering why her attitude toward him had softened so abruptly. Why had she suddenly poured out her heart to him about Jeb? Was it a bid for his sympathy, an attempt to disarm his suspicion?

Because he wondered, he could school his tone to a deceptively casual sympathy as he said, "Naturally it's been rough on you, running the business alone. When do you plan to make the next trip to Fort Yuma?"

INSTANTLY her head came up, the unreadable amber eyes guarded and suspicious.

"Why do you ask that?" she said.

Kern shrugged. "There have been some hostile Paiutes roaming that country lately. You shouldn't be on the trail without proper protection. If you'll let me know when you're leaving I'll speak to Major Woodworth about an escort—"

Before he could finish Penny jumped angrily to her feet. "So the Army can still keep an eye on me! Isn't that it, Kern? Why must you suspect my every move?"

"Perhaps I wouldn't if you stopped seeing Rand Blakeslee!" he retorted.

Penny stepped toward him, her slender hands clenched at her sides.

"I wish you'd stop thinking of Rand Blakeslee as a villain!" she cried. "Rand has never been anything but kind and considerate of me. After Mike disappeared I could never have handled Jeb by myself, but Rand came and helped me. He's the only one who can do anything with Jeb."

Kern started to reply, but Penny didn't give him a chance.

"It's true that Rand has said some unpleasant things in his paper about the Administration," she rushed on, "but so have I—so have lots of other people who want to see this terrible war come to an end. It's just an expression of an opinion. It doesn't mean we're plotting against the Union, or—"

"Penny—Penny! Listen to me!" interrupted Kern, grasping her by the shoulders and giving her a little shake. If only he didn't love her so much, he thought despairingly. With all his heart he wanted her to be innocent or, at worst, mistaken in her loyalties, but she was making it more and more impossible for him to have any faith in her.

"Penny, I don't know how deeply you're involved with Rand Blakeslee," he said tautly, "but if he's guilty of treason—and I think he is—you're going to be tarred with the same brush. They hang enemy agents, Penny. Get out before it's too late!"

She stared up at him a moment, her tawny eyes defiant; then jerking away from him, she turned and hurried out between the patio tables to the crowded street beyond.

Dropping some coins on the table, Kern strode after her, then slowed as he reached the street. What was the use of pursuing her, he thought bitterly. The truth of what she had said when they met was quite apparent—they had nothing more to say to each other.

A clock in a jeweler's window showed twelve-thirty, and Kern quickened his steps in the direction of the *Planet* office. It was later than he'd thought and he wanted to avoid meeting Blakeslee if possible.

The *Planet* was an unpretentious little paper. One of several Los Angeles weeklies, it occupied two high-ceilinged rooms in a stone front store block. The front room, with its counter and desks, served as an office; the back room housed the printing press and supplies.

Kern pushed the door open and a bell jangled raucously. Then a big, thick-lipped, shifty-eyed man in a dirty canvas apron thrust his head into the front office.

"Mister Blakeslee ain't in. Whadya want?" he asked ungraciously.

"I'd like to see some back issues of the paper," Kern told him.

The big man slowly shook his head. "Uh-uh," he said, eying Kern narrowly. "The boss wouldn't like it if I was to let you do that."

Kern's hand went to his pocket. "I'm really interested in seeing those back issues," he said.

The big man came over to the counter then, his shifty eyes avid. "How interested?" he demanded softly.

Kern produced a gold coin and the big man pocketed it with a broken-toothed grin.

[Turn page]

"In there," he said, jerking his head toward the back room

THE PRESS occupied the right half of the room. At the back was a door opening into the alley. On the left side Kern found what he was looking for. In a corner, surrounded by packaged paper, containers of ink and miscellaneous supplies, was a row of packing cases with built in shelves that served as the *Planet's* morgue.

Eagerly, Kern squatted on his heels before the crude file, and his hand shook a little as he reached toward the shelf labeled March. Somewhere in the advertising of these back issues Brant had either found, or hoped to find, mention of the mysterious letters K.P.S With the feeling that he was close to something important, Kern began a rapid scanning of the advertizements. It took longer than he expected. Most of the advertizing was done in both Spanish and English, and that slowed him down.

The first two issues told him nothing. Kern glanced apprehensively at the door. If Blakeslee returned and found him here, he might never find the thing he sought. Desperately, he flipped the pages of the third March issue. Then he saw what he sought —an unobtrusive ad on the back page. It read: "Loft space for rent. 12 Old River Road." It was signed K.P.S.

Absorbed as he was in the excitement of his discovery, Kern heard the soft click of the door opening behind him. He turned his head quickly and saw Rand Blakeslee standing in the door from the alley.

Blakeslee's face was white with fury, his lips drawn back over his narrow teeth as his voice lashed across the room at Kern.

"You might find later news in this week's paper, Lieutenant!" he said harshly.

Replacing the back issues of the *Planet* with deliberate hands, Kern rose and faced him.

"I seem to have found what I was looking for here," he said quietly

For a moment their eyes held, and hate passed between them. Then Kern turned his back on Blakeslee. But as he strode out through the front office, Kern was thinking of how Brant had died—with a knife in his heart. And he knew from the look in Blakeslee's eyes that from this moment on his own life was in jeopardy

He was thinking, too, of the dateline on the paper that had carried the ad: March 16, 1863—the date on which Woodworth had said Brant was killed. Clearly something lay hidden in the ad signed K.P.S.—something that Rand Blakeslee had hoped would remain hidden. Brant must have tried to find out what was back of that ad too, and he had found death. But Kern knew that whatever the danger, he'd gone too far now to turn back. He had to see that loft at 12 Old River Road. He had to know the meaning of those letters K.P.S.

He stepped down to the boardwalk from the entrance to the *Planet*, then turned aside to avoid colliding with a tall figure lurching toward him from the saloon next door. But the figure deliberately planted itself in front of him. It was Jeb Calhoun, and he was plainly the worse for too much whisky.

"You have the look of a man who's been snooping, Lieutenant," said Jeb thickly. "An' I think you should know—we don' like snoopers in this town. Things happen to snoopers—"

"Jeb!" Rand Blakeslee's voice cracked like a whip from the doorway behind Kern. "Come inside a moment, Jeb," he commanded. "I want to talk to you!"

Was this what Penny had meant, Kern wondered, by saying Blakeslee knew how to manage Jeb? Narrowly watching what followed, he was amazed at the change that came over the boy. The look in the bloodshot eyes was suddenly cold sober, and if Kern had ever seen terror in a human expression, it was there in Jeb Calhoun's flushed young face. Terror, and something else—hate. Why should Jeb be afraid of Rand Blakeslee? And why, wondered Kern, had Jeb made such a point of speaking to him? Had his words been a threat or a warning?

SEEKING a place in which to fit this part of the puzzle, Kern got the roan from the Bella Union hitch-rail and headed across town for warehouse row. He'd seen no sign that Blakeslee had had him followed, but as

a precaution he took a circuitous route through Aguirre's Alley and the Mexican section, where he was sure no one would follow. With red flags hung from the windows of the houses still afflicted with the winter's epidemic of smallpox, few people but priests, doctors and health authorities were willing to go into the area. But at last he came out by the mill and headed for Old River Road.

Before the spraddling town began to grow in another direction, Old River Road, winding between the nearly dry bed of the river and the hills, had accumulated a considerable row of rough pine lumber warehouses. But the buildings were weathered now and the neighborhood had a lonely, deserted look.

Kern had tied the roan in a stand of cottonwoods when he heard the whispering of dry leaves on the ground behind him. He whirled, whipping the Colt from its holster. Then a laugh burst from his lips as a bright-eyed squirrel scampered from cover and bounded down the river bank.

But Kern's face sobered. It must have been about here that Major Woodworth and his men had waited for the signal from Brant that had never come. Because all the time that the Major had waited at the appointed spot, Brant had been lying dead in his hotel room.

Thoughtfully, Kern checked the chambers of the Colt, then, holstering it, he turned and strode toward the row of sagging, unpainted buildings.

Number 12 was at the far end of the weed-grown street, and shock made Kern halt before it with quickening pulse. A new padlock and chain glittered on the door and across the front of the building was an unweathered sign that read: Calhoun Mercantile and Freighting Co.

So this was the warehouse Mike had acquired! But this was also the number 12 Old River Road of the *Planet* ad; and up there, hidden in its windowless loft, was the secret Rand Blakeslee had tried so hard to conceal. Suddenly Kern felt sick inside—because when he knew the secret of the loft, he would have evidence that Penny Calhoun and her family were traitors and spies.

With grimly set lips, Kern began a circuit of the building. At the back he found what he'd hoped for—a dusty window that finally yielded to his efforts to pry it open.

Scaling the outer wall, Kern pulled his long body through the window into the shadowy interior. Then he stood stock-still, listening. He thought he'd heard a stealthy, scraping sound in the loft above. He finally decided it was the scurrying of rats, and as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he moved toward the shapes he'd already identified as packing boxes and barrels of flour.

Lighting a match, he read the labels on the boxes. They were marked Prunes, Dried Apples and Dried Apricots. It would be ridiculously simple, he thought, to conceal gold in such a box.

It cost him two more matches, but Kern, seeking an implement to use on the boxes, located a red-handled ax fastened to the wall. Using this, he began breaking open the crates of fruit, dumping their contents on the floor. But every one of them contained exactly what the labels said they did, and the boxes had no false bottoms.

He had taken a step toward the barrels of flour across the room when he heard a sound. There was a low murmur of voices, then the door chain rattled as someone began working with the lock.

DROPPING the ax, Kern looked quickly around. He'd come in primarily to see the loft. Reaching it now was an immediate necessity. But when he'd entered the warehouse he'd neglected to locate the means of reaching the upper room. Frantically his eyes searched the dimness of the big storeroom. Then he saw the narrow ladder in the corner at the far end, and running quietly on the balls of his feet, he threaded his way through the stacked merchandise to its foot.

He'd pulled himself through the trap door opening at the top and had flattened himself beside it when the big door below swung open. Silhouetted against the bright sunlight outside stood two people. One of them was Rand Blakeslee. The other was Penny Calhoun, and she was talking as she entered: ". . . thought I'd better padlock the door after that."

Then she gave a little cry as she saw the opened fruit crates and their scattered contents. "Rand! Look—they've been searching us again!"

Kern could see her raise her head, could imagine the anger in the tawny eyes as she stared at the far end of the room where he'd entered.

"That window!" she cried. "I never thought to have it barred!"

Rand had been bending over, examining the broken crates. Straightening now, he took Penny by the shoulders and started her toward the door.

"You can inventory the last shipment later, my dear," he said, "but you'd better go back to the buggy and wait now. This has just been done, and the intruder may still be here. I'll take a look around."

Kern saw Penny look up at Blakeslee, and the concern in her voice twisted like a knife in his heart as she said, "Do be careful, Rand."

Then Blakeslee turned back to the warehouse and Kern shrank away from the trap door, cursing his own stupidity. He'd trapped himself beautifully in the loft. There seemed to be no exit except by the ladder he'd come up, and slipping the Colt from its holster, Kern thumbed back the hammer.

He could hear Blakeslee moving across the floor below, could hear the slow and cautious scuff of his boots as he poked behind packing boxes, seemingly intent on making a thorough search of the lower floor.

Why the devil doesn't he come up to the loft and get it over with? thought Kern, sweating. He must have guessed I'd come here after leaving the *Planet*.

Then he held his breath as the steps approached the ladder. They paused for an interminable instant, then moved on. After an eternity, the steps recrossed the lower room, and as Kern heard the outer door close and the padlock click, he put his gun away with a long breath of relief.

He couldn't imagine why Blakeslee hadn't uncovered his presence, but there was no time to debate that now. He'd come to investigate the loft and he knew he'd better be getting on with it.

Moving away from the trap door, he got to his feet in the pitch blackness and almost instantly collided with something that crashed noisily forward into the big room. His exploring fingers told him that it was a heavy chair, and fumbling in his pocket for his match box, Kern had the odd sensation that someone else stood near him—someone who had moved quickly and silently out of the way of the falling chair.

NO ONE was visible as the match flared, but there was plenty of concealment for a lurking enemy, and Kern stared about him in amazement. In contrast to the shabby exterior of the building, this room was expensively furnished, with rows of solid-backed chairs on either side of a red-carpeted aisle that led to a platform at the far end of the room.

Well forward on the platform stood a lectern that held a single unlit candle. At one side was a standard from which rippled the silken red and blue folds of the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy; on the other side hung a red-barred white banner inscribed with the Bear Flag emblem of California.

Suddenly, Kern gave a low exclamation and started forward, his boots silent on the red carpet, the blood pounding in his ears. Behind the lectern, on the wall above a high-backed, carved chair, was a hanging of deep red velvet. And under its device of crossed sabers surmounted by a skull were emblazoned in higharching silver letters the words that matched the initials K.P.S.: Knights of the Pacific Slope, and under that: Castle #1.

As the match guttered out in his fingers, Kern stood below the lectern, stunned by the realization of what he'd found. Here, in Mike Calhoun's warehouse loft, was the secret meeting place of the Copperhead organization Major Woodworth was seeking to uncover! The lodge hall, the name, the symbols—it was all so obviously patterned after the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Rebel organization whose subversive activities in Indiana had been exposed the year before.

Then Kern felt the cold sweat start in the small of his back. Brant must have seen this room, after all! Because suddenly, as he'd

stood there, the meaning of the ad in the *Planet* had become clear to Kern. The ad had been a secret announcement of a meeting of the Knights that had been scheduled for that evening three weeks ago—March 16th! Like himself, Brant must have come here after reading the ad, and having seen this room and divined its purpose, he must have planned to come back that night while the meeting was in progress and with Woodworth's help, arrest the leaders of the organization. Only someone had known of Brant's plan and had made sure he didn't return.

Brant had never learned the names of the leaders, but there must be some way of finding out who they were. There must be a list of names, a roster of members. Possession of that would give Woodworth legal proof of their guilt.

Kern knew it was high time he was getting out of here, but even as the thought took form, he was striking his last match, lighting the candle on the lectern. If there was a membership list, he told himself, it might be kept here.

Feverishly, he pawed through the miscellaneous blank forms he found in the cabinet beneath the lectern, flipped the pages of the books of ritual—pausing long enough to scan their treasonable oaths—but there was no membership list. He turned to the back wall, frowning thoughtfully at the red velvet hanging. Suddenly he reached forward and jerked it aside. In a wall niche was a leather-bound book, and with shaking fingers Kern opened it to the first page.

He couldn't have explained why he'd expected to see Mike Calhoun's name at the top of the list. Maybe because this was, after all, the loft of Mike's warehouse, and Mike himself having conveniently dropped out of sight could be suspect. But he'd been wrong. Topping the page as Grand Knight of the Golden Sword was the name of Rand Blakeslee!

Swiftly then, Kern's eyes went down the page. Cabell, Cairn, Calhoun, Jebediah . . .

KERN NEVER KNEW what made him start to turn. There had been no sound on the thick carpet behind him. There was only the voice he tried vainly to identify with its hoarse command, "Don't turn around, Lieutenant!" and the pressure of a gun in his ribs, coupled with the swift jerk on his duty belt as his own gun was lifted from its holster.

Then the man behind him blew out the candle, and Kern caught the sour smell of whisky on his breath.

"You know, you wasn't very smart to come here, Lieutenant," said the low voice from the dark behind him. "The boss knew you was here a while ago, but he'd already sent me to take care of you, so he left. I thought I'd let you snoop a bit just to see how you Yankees operate. But don't fool yourself you're gonna get out of here to tell what you know. You're gonna die right here, where we shoulda killed the snooper they sent from Washington!"

Kern felt the increased pressure of the weapon at his back and flung himself suddenly aside off the platform just as the gun's explosion roared through the loft. His movement had toppled the lectern, and with an oath, his assailant pumped two more shots toward the sound of its fall.

Then Kern, cautiously feeling his way through the chairs that enmeshed him, heard the man stalking him, breathing stealthily, creeping closer. Instinctively, Kern's hands closed on a chair and he raised it above his head.

Then, sensing the man's rush, he brought it down with all his strength.

The Copperhead must have been a big man, for he crashed heavily backward into the space in front of the platform and another shot roared out, apparently triggered by his fall. Instantly Kern was upon him, grappling blindly, seeking his own gun in the other's belt. But the big man rolled mightily, knocking the Colt from Kern's hand even as he grasped it, and helplessly, Kern heard it slide out of reach on the bare floor under the chairs. Then his enemy's powerfully threshing legs flung Kern backward, and he struck his head agonizingly on a corner of the platform.

Dazed by pain, Kern still had the presence of mind to roll away even as two more shots spat death at the spot where he had been

seconds before. He tried to get to his feet, but the big man was upon him. He heard the whistle of air as the empty gun descended like a club. There was a blinding moment of agony as it struck his skull, then Kern was sinking into a black and bottomless pit.

III

Traitor Tactics

LIEUTENANT KERN DEVLIN was first aware of the sound of bells—frantic, tolling bells somewhere in the distance outside. Then he realized that there was a slowly tightening band around his chest that wouldn't let him breathe. He tried to get up and fell back with a groan as the pain knifed through his head. But the groan choked off in a gasp, because his throat was closing like his chest. And then he knew what was torturing his lungs. It was smoke! The room was full of smoke, a thick, acrid, suffocating blanket of it. The warehouse was on fire!

He got to his knees then, but the blanket pushed him down. There wasn't any air up that high. Dully, he realized that the only reason he was still breathing was that he had been on the floor, where a draft still held some oxygen. How long had he lain unconscious? Not long, surely, or the flames would have reached the loft by now.

Then he thought he could hear a faint crackling and he realized that he was bathed in sweat from the suffocating heat of the place. He began to crawl toward the trap door and once, when he put his hand off the edge of the carpet, the wood of the floor felt hot. When, after an eternity, he reached the opening, a blast of heat and smoke leaped up at him and he drew back. But he had to get down. He tried again. Gasping, half falling, he managed to get down the ladder.

The flames were leaping up at the back of the warehouse now, cutting off his escape through the window by which he'd entered. The door was padlocked on the outside. Coughing, fighting for one good breath of air, Kern looked desperately about for some other avenue of escape. Then he thought of the fire ax he'd dropped by the fruit crates. If he could just last long enough to reach that ax he might be able to break down the door. He lurched forward, but the smoke was closing his lungs and he fell headlong several yards short of his goal.

And then above the crackling flames, he heard shouts and the sound of axes being used on the outside of the door. Someone was shouting, "Kern! Kern! Where are you?" and it sounded like Major Woodworth

Kern struggled to get up, to answer the shouts, but it was no good and he fell back. Dimly, he heard the sound of wood splintering; then there was daylight and a blessed rush of air and strong hands grasping him, dragging him outside. He heard a horn blowing and the bells clanging again as the volunteer fire department wagon pulled up. He was aware of a sea of curious faces, of shouts and a bucket brigade. Then he saw Major Woodworth's granite-gray face bending over him, heard his tight-lipped, "Let's get out of here, boy!" as he hoisted Kern's arm over his shoulder. Kern felt himself half dragged, half lifted into a saddle. Then Woodworth swung up on his own mount and leading Kern's horse, headed back to the post.

WHEN THINGS began to come into focus, when he could breathe again, Kern was aware that the post surgeon was swabbing at the gash on the back of his head with carbolic solution, and that it stung like the devil.

Then he saw a scared Sergeant Hitchcock hurry out of the room as Major Woodworth bellowed, "Get that brandy out of the cupboard! Can't you see he's coming out of it?" And Kern realized he was in Woodworth's quarters, on Woodworth's cot.

He sat up then and clutched his head with both hands, in the vain hope that either it or the room would stop whirling.

Woodworth glared as he handed Kern the glass into which he'd splashed some brandy. "Damned near got yourself killed, didn't you?" he snapped.

Kern grinned, recognizing the concern

disguised by the gruff voice, seeking words of gratitude for his rescue which would not embarrass either of them.

"It could have been a lot worse, sir, if you hadn't been there to pull me out."

"Could have been a lot worse if the fellow who set the fire had known what he was doing," retorted Woodworth. "Flames hadn't made much headway, or you wouldn't be here!"

"But how did you know I was there, sir?"

Woodworth grunted. "Queer thing," he said. "Little Mexican boy came running in chattering about having a message of great importance. Said he'd been told to say that Lieutenant Devlin was in a warehouse at 12 Old River Road and that if I wanted him to get out alive I'd better go over there fast. Youngster wriggled away from me and was gone before I could get any more out of him." His gray eyes bored into Kern. "Any idea who might have sent him?"

As Kern slowly shook his head, Woodworth shot a second question at him. "What have you found out so far?"

Kern told him then. Told him of everything that had happened since he left the post before noon: of the small Rebel flag he'd found at the Bella Union, of his encounter with Penny, of the letters K.P.S. and how the ad in the *Planet* had led him to the warehouse and its damning evidence of the secret society Woodworth had been looking for.

The major hardly seemed to be listening until Kern mentioned what he had found in the loft

"So that was their base of operations," he muttered, his gray eyes narrowing. "Well, a least we are sure now that the Calhouns are in on the plot. You mark my words, Kern, the Knights will try to run that gold through yet, and when they do, you're going to find it in Calhoun's wagons!"

"I'm afraid so, sir," muttered Kern. He'd been feeling better for the last few minutes, but the major's words spoiled that. "I guess I let you down rather badly by not hanging on to that roster of members," he added bitterly. "That was the legal proof of Blakeslee's guilt. The last I saw of it was just before the fight. Either the Copperhead took it or it went up in smoke."

Woodworth looked grim. "Right now it wouldn't help us very much if we did have it," he said. "I saw Blakeslee riding out of town as I headed for the warehouse. Too bad there wasn't something in this that would have empowered me to stop him—" Woodworth reached into an inner pocket and drew out a telegram. "This will open your eyes on the subject of our Copperhead editor," he said handing it to Kern. "Came from Washington this morning. It's the answer to a query I sent 'em two weeks ago

Someone had made sure Brant wouldn't return

asking for anything they might have on Blakeslee."

Rapidly, Kern's eyes moved over the message. Then he whistled. "So Blakeslee and some of his friends were tossed out of the Indiana Castle of the Knights of the Golden Circle—"

"Because they not only wanted to run things their way," interrupted Woodworth, "but they had thrust sticky fingers into the treasury! Kern, after what you uncovered this afternoon, doesn't that spell anything to you?"

Kern stared at him with a look of growing comprehension. "You mean," he began.

"I mean," said Woodworth impatiently, "that when Blakeslee and his friends were thrown out of the Indiana Knights, they probably looked around for greener fields. Southern California with its Rebel sympathizers was made to order for them."

THE MAJOR got out a fresh cigar and savagely bit off the end.

"Way I see it," he went on, "Blakeslee must have dreamed of establishing a big gold-smuggling organization under the Copperhead banner here in the West—the Knights of the Pacific Slope. He must have planted the Nevada cell of the organization first, with instructions to get the haul out through San Francisco. As we know, that was blocked. But in the meantime, Blakeslee had set up his newspaper as a front, then had got busy organizing a hand-picked brotherhood of Knights for the work here in Los Angeles."

"Probably that wasn't hard to do," said Kern. "A few pro-Southern speeches in the right quarters, and I'll bet the local Rebs flocked in begging to help smuggle Captain Dixie's gold through to the Confederacy."

"Uh-huh," grunted Woodworth, puffing the cigar alight, "only I'd lay twenty to one that the Confederacy's share doesn't amount to a hill of beans by the time Blakeslee and his gang take their cut!"

He blew out a cloud of smoke, hard gray eyes staring speculatively through it at Kern.

"I hope you're being realistic about this, Kern," he said suddenly. "I hope you realize that all this doesn't make Miss Calhoun any less guilty of treason if she happens to be the one who tries to smuggle that gold through Yuma!"

"I know, sir." Shakily, Kern got up and went to stare out the window, his dark eyes bleak with despair. "I still can't believe that Penny knows what she's doing," he muttered. "I wish I knew what kind of spell Blakeslee's put on her."

He turned suddenly. "Or, for that matter, what kind of hold he has on Jeb." Then he told Woodworth about the incident in front of the *Planet* office following Jeb's strange remark about snoopers.

"Sounds almost as though he were threatening you with the same thing Brant got." Woodworth gave him a searching look. "I wonder," he said slowly, "if Jeb Calhoun could be our killer? Kern—do you think it could have been Jeb who tried to finish you in the warehouse?"

Kern returned the stare with the misery of uncertainty in his dark eyes. Because suddenly he was remembering things about the man in the loft—the smell of whisky on his breath when he'd blown out the candle, the elusive quality in his voice.

"I can't be sure, sir," he said finally. "But even if Jeb is mixed up with an organization of subversive thugs, I don't like to believe he's a murderer."

"You don't like to believe Miss Penny is an enemy agent, either!" retorted Woodworth.

"Just the same," Kern insisted stubbornly, "I wish there were some way we could check on Jeb's whereabouts the night Brant was killed."

Woodworth thought he was a fool not to accept any Calhoun's guilt as a foregone conclusion. Kern could see it in the man's flinty eyes, but Woodworth drew a pencil from his pocket and made a note on the back of the telegram.

"I'll see what I can find out," he said, and rose. "You'll need some rest now, boy."

But Kern was already moving toward the door. "I mend easily, sir," he said with a crooked grin. "And there are some questions I want to ask over at the Calhoun store."

Major Woodworth opened his mouth to protest, thought better of it and called for Sergeant Hitchcock.

"You will accompany Lieutenant Devlin, Sergeant," he snapped when the man stood before him at parade attention. "But first get the lieutenant a hand weapon, and make sure your own is in good working order!"

IT WAS NOT yet dark when they reached the corner of Arcadia and Los Angeles Streets, but the Calhoun store was already closed and locked. Kern tried the door and then knocked, but there was no response.

"Around this way!" Kern tossed over his shoulder at Sergeant Hitchcock as, his heart beginning to pound with fear, he strode around to the patio on the side street which gave onto the living quarters back of the store.

It took two pulls on the bell by the patio gate to bring out José, young son of the Calhoun's Mexican servant couple. But he would open the gate only a crack.

"I am sorry, Señor-Lieutenant," said the boy, "but the family can see no wan. They cannot be distorb."

"They'll see me!" said Kern, and pushed through the gate followed by Sergeant Hitchcock.

José, running ahead, turned with frightened dark eyes, his arms spread across the narrow door to the parlor-dining room where Jeb lay sprawled on a leather sofa. On the dining table were a carafe of water and a glass. On the floor was an empty whisky bottle, and judging from the fumes in the room, Jeb was submerged in a drunken stupor.

"Please," cried the Mexican boy, his dark, liquid eyes eloquent, "please, Señor-Lieutenant, you must not take heem to the *calaboso!* Señor Jeb has save' your life wance today, and he ees seek—he ees ver' seek."

Kern grasped the boy by his white shirt front. "Say that again, *muchacho!*" he commanded. "What do you mean—he saved my life?"

But the boy, realizing he had said too much, looked at the floor. "I don' know, Señor-Lieutenant," he mumbled, "I don' speak ver' good Eenglish."

"All right; I'll tell you," said Kern, his tone gone suddenly harsh. "Señor Jeb was the one who hid in the warehouse today and laid me out then set the place on fire, wasn't he? Then he got to thinking about what he'd done and got scared and sent you to the major—isn't that it?"

"No, Señor-Lieutenant!" cried the boy vehemently. "That ees not true! Eet was that other wan—that Blak-slee—Señor Jeb overhears heem plan to have you keel. 'I cannot have the Lieutenant's death on my conscience too, José,' he tells me and sends me to the Señor-Major weeth the warning."

Kern thought about that for a minute. Jeb didn't want his death, too, on his conscience. Did that mean that the major had been right after all?

Abruptly Kern reached for the carafe of water on the table and sloshed its contents into Jeb's face. Then he shook him, calling his name, and at last Jeb began to mumble and fight him off.

Kern gave him another shake. "Jeb," he said urgently, "can you hear what I'm saying?"

Jeb moaned, then the amber eyes opened a little wider and Kern saw recognition in them. "H'llo, L'tenant," he slurred.

"Jeb, listen to me!" Kern commanded. "What are you trying to forget when you get drunk like this? Have you killed somebody, Jeb?"

The youth looked up at him then, and Kern saw that the blood-shot amber eyes were as cold sober and terror-filled as they had been earlier today when Blakeslee had called him into the *Planet* office.

SUDDENLY Jeb seemed to sag in Kern's grasp. "Yeah, I killed him," he mumbled. "No use trying to hide it any longer. I did it!" Then he began to sob.

"Whom did you kill, Jeb?" demanded Kern, shaking him vigorously.

"That government man Brant!" sobbed Jeb hysterically. "I killed him. I didn't even know his name when I did it—I was drunk! But they saw me coming out of his room and they found the knife on me. They showed it to me. I can still see it—that awful, bloody knife!"

"Who are they?" asked Kern quickly. "Who showed you the knife.

But Jeb could no longer respond. He had buried his head in his arms and was sobbing with such uncontrolled abandon that Kern was alarmed. He turned to José.

"Where is the señorita?" he demanded.

"Señorita Calhoun has gone, Señor-Lieutenant."

"Gone!" Kern realized his voice had become a shout, and for the moment he forgot Jeb and his confession. "When did she go?"

"She goes weeth the wagons two hours ago," José told him in a frightened voice.

Kern didn't need to stride to the window and thrust aside the crisp curtains, seeing the wagon yard quiet and empty in the sunset light, to know it was true. Sick, stunned, he tried to look the grim truth in the face. Believing they'd successfully put him out of the way, the Knights had evidently decided to utilize the subsequent confusion to make a run for it with the gold. Blakeslee had probably been the advance guard. And even while he'd lain unconscious on the floor of the loft, Penny had fled town with her precious cargo.

It left him no choice. Duty demanded that he follow and stop her before she reached Yuma. And with a bitter certainty, Kern knew that concealed somewhere in the freighter's load, he was going to find contraband gold. This time, he thought with a sinking heart, he was going to catch Penny red-handed

A steely coldness was in him now. Some of it got into his voice as he turned and spoke to Sergeant Hitchcock, who stood in the doorway.

"Get up town on the double, Sergeant," he snapped. "Assemble the troop—as many as you can find who are sober enough to ride. Prepare to move out immediately. Rations and ammunition for five days."

Then he turned to Jeb who now sat quietly, elbows on knees, bloodshot eyes staring vacantly into space.

"All right, Jeb," said Kern wearily, "I think you'd better come along and have a talk with Major Woodworth."

Somehow, he got Jeb on his feet and propelled the youth's big, slack body outside to where the roan was tied. Jeb moved like a sleepwalker, dazed and clumsy, but unresisting, and finally Kern got him into the saddle.

Back at the post, Kern stopped at the gate and spoke to the sentry.

"This man is a prisoner," he told him. "If he tries to leave, stop him."

"Yes, sir."

The sentry saluted and stepped back, and with white, set lips that betrayed the ache in his heart, Kern led Jeb toward Woodworth's office. It was bad enough bringing Penny's brother in for the murder of a government agent, but Kern daren't let himself think of how he'd feel when the time came to arrest Penny for treason.

HE LEFT Jeb on a bench outside Then, at Woodworth's gruff "Come in!" when he knocked, he entered and faced the Old Man with haggard eyes.

"It looks like you've called the shots right from the beginning, sir," he said harshly. "Penny Calhoun took her wagons out of town two hours ago. I'm following immediately—Sergeant Hitchcock is presently assembling the troop. And—" he drew a ragged breath—"I've brought in Brant's murderer, sir. Jeb Calhoun has confessed. He's outside."

But Woodworth was slowly shaking his head, and his flinty eyes held admiration.

"You've turned out to be a good intelligence man, Kern," he said, "but I'm glad to tell you you're wrong on one point. No matter what Jeb Calhoun told you, he didn't kill Brant. He couldn't have: I checked with the sheriff and he says Jeb was locked in jail, dead drunk, the night Brant was murdered. He was still pretty well under when his brother Knights bailed him out the next morning!"

Kern was still staring, speechless, at the major when the shot came from the courtyard. He whirled, knowing even before he strode through the door that the bench would be empty. Jeb had escaped!

Followed by Major Woodworth, he ran across the lamplit dusk of the yard to where the sentry lay sprawled before the gate. Sergeant Hitchcock was already bending over the man, who had a gash from a blow

on the back of his head. Evidently his rifle had accidentally discharged when he fell.

"Just knocked out," grunted Woodworth when he'd knelt and examined the sentry. "Probably done when his back was turned. Young Calhoun still has a lot to answer for when we get him back."

Then Sergeant Hitchcock stepped forward. "Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "Lieutenant Devlin's troop is just ready to move out."

Woodworth rose and gripped Kern's hand, and the flinty eyes softened for a moment.

"I know this isn't going to be easy for you, boy," he said, "but try to forget you ever loved her. Try to remember she's betrayed her country."

Kern didn't answer. Drawing on his gauntlets, he strode savagely toward the stables. Try to forget he'd ever loved her! It was like telling his heart to forget to beat.

Like a man driven by the devil, Kern rode out of town at the head of A Troop, splashing across the ankle-deep river and angling south and east in the deepening dusk that purpled the rugged San Gabriels to dark shadows against the fading blue of the evening sky.

But Kern gave no thought to the beauty of the April night as he rode grimly down the trail that Penny's wagons had traveled two hours earlier. Was it possible, he wondered, that only this morning he had ridden this same trail with some shred of hope in his heart—hope that his suspicions of Penny were unfounded? Now even that hope had vanished. Because everything that had happened in the last twelve hours, every bit of evidence he'd uncovered, had pointed inescapably to the fact that the Calhouns were willing participants in Rand Blakeslee's scheme to smuggle gold to the Confederacy.

And yet, even as he pounded down the trail in pursuit of Penny, he could not help feeling that the evidence was not all in. Some very important parts of the puzzle were missing. There was Mike, for instance. What was the real reason back of his disappearance?

Penny's belief—or pretended belief—that her father was being held by the Army had been so patently ridiculous that Kern had thought at first that it was a poor attempt to cover the fact that Mike had gone off on some secret business for Blakeslee. But now he began to wonder. If Mike was in on Blakeslee's conspiracy, why hadn't his name appeared on the roster of the Knights of the Pacific Slope? Jeb had been the only Calhoun listed.

Then there was the business of Jeb himself, soaking up whisky to blot out a feeling of guilt for a murder he hadn't committed. Why had Jeb been made to believe that he had murdered Brant?

Kern thought about that for a minute. According to Woodworth, Jeb still wasn't sober when his friends had bailed him out the next morning. Supposing these erstwhile friends had actually been the executioners Blakeslee had sent to silence Brant? Supposing they—and Blakeslee—had shown Jeb the knife and convinced him in his half-drunken state that he was Brant's murderer, but that they would keep his secret provided

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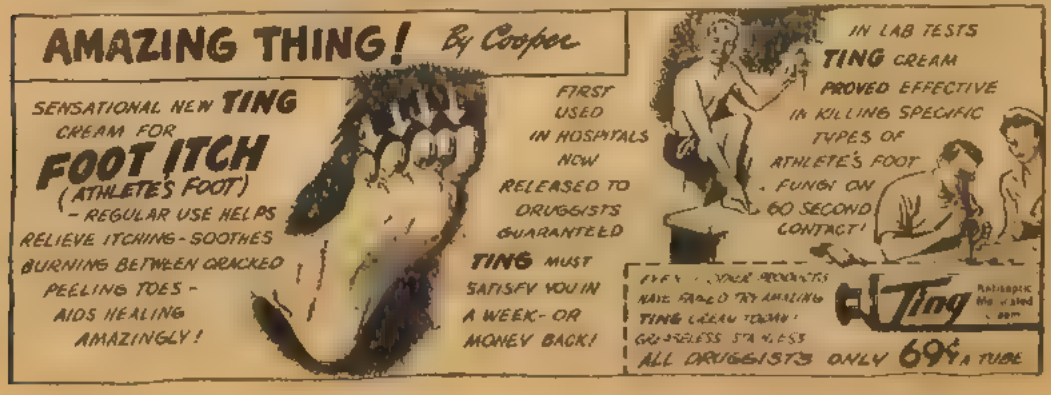

he would do as he was told from then on? That would be a powerful weapon in Blakeslee's hands.

There wasn't any of it that made any sense, and finally Kern gave it up. His head ached abominably with every jarring beat of the roan's hoofs, and he scrubbed a weary hand across his eyes.

THEN SERGEANT HITCHCOCK was pulling up beside him. "Wagons just ahead, sir," he said.

Kern looked up. A round white moon had risen to flood the sage and cactus desert with a silver radiance, and on the rising ribbon of trail ahead he saw the three mule-drawn freighters lumbering slowly through the night. There was his quarry—this was the moment he had dreaded, and he wondered if he was going to be able to give the proper order.

Then he heard his own voice coming out harsh and flat. "We'll overtake and surround the wagons, Sergeant. Carbines at ready. Stop and search them as they stand. We're looking for contraband gold!"

And putting spurs to the startled roan, Kern galloped ahead. He passed the first wagon, glimpsing frightened Mexican faces—a man and a woman with a shawl over her head, probably the parents of José. The driver of the middle wagon was also Mexican, but on the high seat of the lead freighter, as he had expected, sat Penny Calhoun, and she was having trouble with her near wheeler.

Even before he drew abreast of the outfit Kern could see the animal's ears flatten as it began to kick and snap at its teammates. He could see the ripple of nervousness that traveled along the bony backs of the rest of the team; saw the twitch of the long ears, caught the increased tempo of the trotting hoofs as the mules felt the load ease on the straightaway.

It looked as though Penny was trying to control them. But the mules were beginning to run now and he knew she had seen him. Surely she wouldn't be foolish enough to let them run wild in an attempt to outdistance him? Kern didn't take any chance. Swerving quickly toward the wagon, he stood in his stirrups, and grabbing the jerkline from Penny's hands, he hauled back, bringing the animals to a braying, protesting halt.

Then Penny, a small figure in dark riding skirt and boots, her face ablaze with anger, was scrambling down over the wheel to stand before him where he had dismounted.

"Just what did you think you were doing, Kern Devlin?" she cried furiously. "I could have held those lop-eared jacks even if you hadn't—"

She stopped then, looking beyond him to where the dismounted troop was pushing aside the protesting Mexicans while they hauled crates and barrels from the beds of the freighters.

"Kern!" she cried angrily, "what's the meaning of this? They have no right to—"

"I'm afraid they have, Penny," he interrupted grimly. "We're searching your wagons for that contraband gold!"

She stood in the moonlight looking at him as though he had struck her, and he would have sworn the shocked surprise in her eyes was real.

"Kern, I—I don't know what you're talking about!" she told him faintly.

"Look, Penny," he said in a stifled voice, "it's too late to play innocent now. We know all about Rand Blakeslee and his plan to smuggle gold to the Confederate authorities in Texas. What's more to the point, we know he's using your wagons and passport to get it past Yuma."

He could see the disbelief, the anger growing in her eyes.

"That's not true!" she burst out. "Even if Rand Blakeslee wanted to do a thing like that, don't you suppose I know what's in my wagons?"

Her lip curled. "But of course you won't take my word for it. Go ahead—dump the load on the ground! Break the cases open! Tear the wagons apart while you're at it!"

It twisted his heart the way her voice broke on a sob, the way the amber eyes were brimming, but he knew he had to steel himself against it.

"That's exactly what I intend to do!" he said harshly. And turning on his heel, he strode to where troopers Timmons and O'Hare were struggling to lift a heavy barrel out the tailgate of the wagon.

FLOUR BARRELS were emptied one at a time into a clean canvas. They opened and emptied crates and unrolled bolts of flannel. They examined the floors of the wagons for false bottoms. But there wasn't any gold. Not a sign nor a trace of it.

Kern, struggling with a guilty feeling of relief, felt his face burning with embarrassment as he gave the order to replace everything as nearly as possible the way it had been found. But he was deeply puzzled. He'd been so sure the gold would be hidden somewhere in the freighter's cargo.

Uncomfortably, he stood watching the sweating troopers reload the wagons. Then, suddenly, he thought he knew why they hadn't found any gold.

Blakeslee knew he was watching Penny, knew he would follow her whenever she left town. Probably Blakeslee had planned to have him removed anyway. His stumbling onto the secret of the loft this afternoon had simply provided a needed opportunity. Naturally, Blakeslee had had no suspicion that Kern would escape his death trap, but he must have decided to take extra precaution anyway. He must have decided to take the gold out of Los Angeles by other means than the wagons, in case Woodworth had Penny followed later. That would mean Blakeslee had arranged to rendezvous with her somewhere on the trail and transfer the treasure to her wagons before she reached Yuma.

Still thinking about that, Kern walked over to the flat rock at the edge of the trail where Penny sat beside the Mexican woman, arms folded, amber eyes smoldering.

"Everything's ready to go," he said briefly.

"And you didn't find any gold. And of course you're terribly sorry to have troubled me," she said with heavy sarcasm. "Well, think nothing of it—you've delayed me only a couple of hours. But that wouldn't be important to you!"

"Is it important to you?" he asked quickly, his eyes narrowing. "Will it make you late to an appointment on the trail? An appointment, for instance, with someone who is going to deliver the gold to you?"

She stared at him a moment in silent, white-faced anger.

"Why don't you come along and see?" she challenged heatedly.

He retorted, "I intend to!"

She sprang to her feet then and stood defiantly before him, and again Kern was reminded of a small, tawny-eyed tigress.

"Once you said you loved me, Kern Devlin," she said, her voice low and vibrant with suppressed fury, "but I know now that you lied. Because love is built on trust, and nobody could ever accuse you of trusting me!"

Then she turned and ran to her wagon.

Kern looked after her a moment with compressed lips, and then he strode back to the troop. He turned the roan over to Sergeant Hitchcock to be led, then he gave the order to march.

"Divide the troop into front and rear guards," he snapped. "Columns of twos. The wagons between. You may mount the troop, Sergeant."

Then he went back to the lead wagon and swung up onto the seat beside Penny.

"Move over," he commanded roughly. "I'm driving this team!"

He saw her gloved fingers close on the coiled mulewhip, and for a minute he thought she would strike him with it. Then she thrust it toward him and let him take the jerkline.

KICKING off the brake, Kern shouted at the mules, cracking the whip above their ears, and with a rattle of chains and singletrees, the heavy freighter creaked into motion and began its jolting journey down the rutted trail.

"Apparently you don't even trust me beyond reach," Penny said acidly.

"I was thinking of the safety of your neck and these ornery jacks," he retorted. "But while we're on the subject of distrust, maybe you'll explain why I should trust you when you sneak your wagons out of town at night!"

"I didn't sneak them out," she told him angrily. "You ought to know how hot the days get on the desert between here and Yuma. Mike always rolls at night this time of year."

"But it was more convenient to leave after

Blakeslee had had me slugged and left for dead in a warehouse somebody had set on fire, wasn't it?" he demanded.

She turned toward him, her amber eyes wide with seemingly genuine surprise.

"You mean someone hit you and—and burned the warehouse?" she gasped unbelievingly.

When he nodded she burst out, "I should have known it was you who broke in there today! But don't try to dodge responsibility for the damage you did with that story about being slugged. You probably got careless with your matches and before you knew it you'd set the place on fire. Oh Kern, how could —"

"That's not the way it was at all," he cut in, watching her closely. "After I'd discovered the layout in the loft, somebody jumped me. There was a fight, and when I woke up the warehouse was burning. And now I suppose you'll tell me you don't know what was in the loft?"

She said coldly, "I don't know. The warehouse belonged to Rand Blakeslee, and when we ran out of space at the store Mike leased the lower floor from Rand because the rent was cheap. I never saw the loft."

So the warehouse didn't belong to Mike, but to Blakeslee! Kern could believe that, but was it possible that Penny really didn't know the use to which the loft was put?

"Look, Penny," he said skeptically, "do you mean to tell me you didn't know Rand Blakeslee is the head of a subversive Rebel society that had its lodge hall in the warehouse loft? Or that your own brother is one of its members?"

She turned swiftly toward him then, and even allowing for the effect of the moon's light, he could see that her face was ghastly pale.

"Kern, you're making this up!" she cried. "You ought to know Jeb wouldn't join an organization of that kind!"

She might be acting. He couldn't be sure. And so he watched her narrowly as he asked, "You've never heard of the Knights of the Pacific Slope?"

"No, I never have!" She flung the words out like a challenge. It sounded like the truth.

Kern shrugged. "Stop me if I'm telling you something you already know," he said sarcastically. Then he told her what he'd found in the loft. Told her of the membership list and of his belief that the government agent, Brant, had also located the headquarters of the secret society and had been about to return and arrest its leaders.

"Obviously," Kern ended, "they had to get rid of Brant for the same reason they tried to get rid of me today. So the Knights had Brant quietly knifed in his hotel room. And that's where Jeb comes into the picture."

HE STOLE a glance at Penny and saw that her eyes had widened in horror. Ruthlessly, he continued.

"Remember you told me Jeb had been acting as though he felt guilty about something?" he asked. "Well, Jeb's conscience is bothering him, all right. Before I left tonight he confessed to murdering Brant. Naturally, I arrested him and took him to the post, but—"

"No!" Penny's cry seemed torn from her heart. "Jeb couldn't do a thing like that!"

"That's just it, Penny," he said quickly. "Jeb *couldn't* have done it. Major Woodworth has the sheriff's word for it that Jeb spent the night of the murder in jail, drunk. But Jeb doesn't know that. He was still groggy when the Knights bailed him out the next morning, and tonight he skipped out on us before we could tell him."

Kern paused a moment, looking down into the amber eyes. "Don't you see what it means, Penny? Somebody wants Jeb to believe he murdered Brant. Somebody is holding the threat of betrayal over his head in order to control him. And it shouldn't be hard for you to guess who that is, or how little his pretended friendship is worth!"

She looked at him in stunned silence, and she either didn't believe him or she was pretending not to.

"Kern, this is fantastic!" she burst out finally. "Are you trying to tell me that Rand Blakeslee would do a thing like that to my brother? Do you really expect me to believe it when Rand has sat up night after night helping me sober up Jeb when he was

so bad? Why, Rand has been absolutely wonderful to me. Besides, he's—he's asked me to marry him!"

Kern stared at her a moment in bitter silence. "So that's how it is?" he said finally.

"That's how it is, Kern," she said, and drawing the full riding skirt primly about her knees, she moved to the far corner of the wagon seat.

He knew then there was no use quizzing her further. Talk was futile. Either Penny was guilty as sin, or she was blind. And how could she be blind after what he'd told her?

The hostile silence grew between them with the miles, and after a while he thought Penny slept, her head resting against the puckered sheeting of the wagon top.

He looked at that lovely bronze head and the word he whispered was like the bite of alum on his tongue: "Copperhead!" Because now he was sure it was true—sure that Penny was lost to him forever.

IV

Sidewinder Showdown

THERE was no way of telling when or where Blakeslee had planned to rendezvous with Penny's wagons, Kern thought as he checked the load in the carbine he'd had Sergeant Hitchcock bring from his saddle scabbard. But whenever it happened, there was sure to be a fight.

Blakeslee would be alerted by Penny's delayed arrival and he would undoubtedly be riding with a large force of the Knights at his back. Quite likely they had filtered out of town one at a time, following Blakeslee, and each man would be carrying part of the gold in his saddlebags. That was the way Kern pictured it, and as the sky rimming the mountains to the east turned to flame with the coming day, he kept a sharper watch for movement in the undergrowth. They had moved into higher country now, and the juniper and piñon could well screen a band of horsemen until the very moment they attacked and seized the wagons.

But the sun rose and dispelled the concealing shadows with their threat of ambush, and at the top of a long grade that angled down to a tree-shaded bottomland where a trickle of water showed among gray boulders, Kern ordered a ten-minute halt.

It was then, as the motion of the wagons ceased, that Penny stirred and straightened, rubbing her eyes, her cheeks as rosy as a waking child's.

"We've made better time than I expected," she said, looking about her. "Down there is the Cottonwoods—it's an abandoned Butterfield station where there's plenty of water. We'll rest there during the day. That is," she amended acidly with a mocking glance at Kern, "we'll rest there if *you* have no objections—Lieutenant!"

Kern didn't answer. With bleak face, he summoned Sergeant Hitchcock and gave the order to move on. Then he turned back to Penny and placed one hand pleadingly over hers.

"Penny," he said gently, "I know how you feel about me. But it's a long way to Yuma. Let's not fight all the way!"

She jerked her hands from his grasp. "What do you expect me to do," she cried, "look upon you as a friend when you persist in treating me like an enemy?"

Kern stood and cracked the long whip out over the mules' heads. "Well," he said angrily over his shoulder, "aren't you?"

Penny recoiled as though he'd cut at her with the whip, and for a moment her face flamed in hot anger. Then the strength seemed to go out of her and she leaned back against the wagon cover.

"No, Kern, I'm not," she said tiredly, "and if I thought for one minute that the things you've accused Rand Blakeslee of were true, I'd never see him again. But what you don't seem to understand is that the Rand Blakeslee I've known has been kind and good and a champion of peace. I've admired him for those qualities."

"Even so," snapped Kern, "I can't understand your not seeing some indication that Blakeslee is an enemy agent. Didn't he ever do or say anything that made you suspect where his real sympathies lay?"

She was silent for a long moment, rocking with the downhill jolting of the wagon. "There was one time—" she began, her tone reluctant. Then she added hastily, "But Rand explained it. He came into the store one afternoon wearing a little Confederate flag in his buttonhole. I didn't like it and I said so. I told him to get rid of it. He laughed and said it didn't mean anything. He said somebody had stuck it in his buttonhole that day at a luncheon where he'd been asked to make a speech about—"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Kern sharply. "When did this happen?"

She considered. "About — three weeks ago."

Kern stared at her. Three weeks ago. Brant had been murdered just three weeks ago. His pulses racing in sudden excitement, Kern rummaged in his pocket. The little Confederate flag he'd found this morning was still there, and he brought it out and held it toward her.

"Is this anything like the flag Blakeslee wore?" he demanded.

PENNY took the tiny emblem and turned it in her slender fingers. "Why, this might be the same one!" she cried. "Rand came in the next day and told me I'd been right—he should have gotten rid of it before he left the store. He said a man on the street had picked a fight with him over it and had ripped it out of his lapel. I remember the buttonhole was torn, and I said I'd mend—"

She broke off, sudden fear coming into her eyes as she looked into Kern's face. "Kern, what is it?" she cried.

He didn't answer for a moment, his mind racing back to this morning, back to Blakeslee standing in the Calhoun store flicking ash from a mended buttonhole in his lapel. Why hadn't he connected Blakeslee with the emblem in the first place? But then he was aware of Penny tugging at his sleeve, of her voice insistently crying a question.

"Kern, tell me—where did you get this flag?"

He turned and looked down at her. "At the Bella Union," he said slowly, "I found it on the floor of the room where Brant was murdered. Looks like it might have been your friend Blakeslee who did the job, doesn't it?"

Afterward Kern was never sure of Penny's reaction. He thought he saw dawning horror and disillusionment in her eyes as the truth hit her, but he glimpsed it only because at that moment the fractious left wheeler that had given her trouble last night began to act up again. Maybe it was the rattle of a loose stone that started it; maybe the smell of the water below maddened the mule. In any case, the temperamental animal began to plunge against its collar, shying away from the edge of the steep embankment, snapping viciously as it shoved toward the inside of the narrow trail. The inside mules shoved back, kicking and rearing. Then the entire team turned into threshing, pitching demons that were impossible to control.

Sweat beading his upper lip, Kern shouted, hauling back on the jerkline, riding the brake, but the mules were panicky now. Then he realized they were going down too fast, too close to the trail's edge! There was a sickening lurch as the big freighter's rear wheels slewed in the soft stuff at the edge. Then Penny was flung violently against him as the seat began to tilt. Grabbing frantically for the high side, Kern scooped Penny under one arm and flung himself outward with a mighty effort that carried them clear. They rolled back into the trail just as the heavy wagon turned spinning, dusty wheels to the sky and crashed over and over down the slope, taking the screaming, kicking mules with it.

Bruised, but otherwise unhurt, Kern got to his feet and then lifted Penny.

"Are you all right?" he panted. And when she nodded, white-faced, he turned toward Sergeant Hitchcock who was spurring back toward them.

"Take the rest of the outfit down to the Cottonwoods and make camp," Kern shouted. "I'm going down to the wreck—if any of those jacks are still alive they'll have to be destroyed."

He turned and digging in his spurred heels started down the loose talus of the embankment that was strewn with the scattered

cargo of the freighter.

Three of the mules still lived, and the echo of his third shot had scarcely reverberated through the canyon when he saw that Penny had followed him and was standing only a few feet away beside the broken crates and the wreckage of the over-turned wagon.

She was looking at him strangely, her amber eyes enormous in her white face. But it wasn't so much the look that set his heart pounding as the thing she held in her hand. It was a small canvas sack, and Kern didn't need to see it opened to know that it held gold-dust.

IN TWO strides he was beside her, the gun still in his hand. "Where did you get that?" he demanded, his tone sharp.

Mutely, Penny gestured toward the exposed underside of the wagon where most freighters carry a spare tongue. This one was no exception, but this tongue had been sawed in two lengthwise and hollowed out to hold the pokes of gold; then the two halves had been fitted together again. Here was the smuggled gold he'd been seeking, here where Major Woodworth had predicted he'd find it—in Penny Calhoun's freighter! And he had no slightest doubt that there would be more beneath the beds of the other two wagons.

He turned from his inspection, his face white and taut. "Well, Penny?" he asked.

Penny seemed to shrivel and her voice sounded as though it came from a great distance. "Kern, I—I know how this looks. But I swear to you by all I hold sacred that I didn't know it was here!"

Fifteen minutes ago, before the wreck, he'd been almost ready to believe in her again. He wanted to believe in her now, but this evidence was too damning. He wished there were some way out of it, but there wasn't and he hated himself for what he must do.

"I'll have to take you back as my prisoner, Penny," he said then, and would never have recognized the harsh voice as his own.

[Turn page]

Lee

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He had taken a step toward her when shouts and a fusillade of shots rang out from the direction the troop and wagons had taken into the Cottonwoods on the yonder side of the stream.

Then a voice spoke behind them—Rand Blakeslee's voice. "Drop your gun, Lieutenant, and stand where you are! I'll take over your prisoner. And don't expect any help from your troop—my men are all around them!"

Kern knew then this was the ambush he should have feared—here at the Cottonwoods, not on the trail. And Penny had let them walk into it!

He looked at her bitterly as he let the gun drop from his hand. But Penny was standing white-faced and silent, as though frozen by fear.

Then Rand Blakeslee, a pistol in his hand, stepped out of the willows followed by the man with the shifty eyes and the broken-toothed grin whom Kern remembered from the *Planet* office

Blakeslee spoke to the man without taking his pale eyes from Kern.

"Put your gun away, Gore, and get Miss Penny across the stream to the cabin," he ordered. "I'll be along directly."

Gore thrust his Colt into his belt, his thick lips spreading in their evil grin as his hairy hand closed on Penny's arm.

"Sure you don't need some help here, boss?" he asked. "The lieutenant don't kill easy!"

"You should know!" snapped Blakeslee. "If you'd done a good job yesterday I wouldn't have to do it over for you now!"

So Gore had been his assailant in the warehouse, Kern thought. Then he saw Blakeslee's gun come up and knew that this was the end of the trail.

KERN TURNED his eyes to Penny and in a sudden flash of revelation he knew, too late, that he'd been wrong about her. Knew with an awful certainty what she meant to do.

"Penny—No!" he shouted. But if she heard him she paid no heed, tearing suddenly free of her captor's grasp and springing protectively between Kern and Blakeslee's gun.

The weapon roared, but Blakeslee's arm had jerked up at Kern's shout and the deadly slug sped harmlessly overhead.

"Good God, Penny!" snarled Blakeslee, obviously shaken. "Get away from him!"

But Penny, two spots of color in her white cheeks, fury in her amber eyes, stood her ground.

"You murderer!" she flung at him in a low voice. "Go ahead—shoot again. Kill us both. Only this time you won't be able to blame Jeb and hold it over his head the way you did when you killed Brant!"

A faint surprise widened Blakeslee's pale eyes. "So you know about that?" he murmured.

She eyed him scornfully. "I know all about you now, Rand Blakeslee! You and your Confederate-backed newspaper with its talk of peace! Kern Devlin was right about you from the start, but I didn't have sense enough to believe him."

Sudden tears sprang to her amber eyes. "And to think I invited you into our home—that I believed you were Jeb's friend those nights you brought him home and helped me sober him up. And all the time it was only because you were afraid he'd tell me the truth—that you and your precious Knights were plotting to use Mike's wagons and passport to smuggle gold to the Confederacy!"

Her voice caught on a sob. "To think I even believed you when you said you loved me!"

"Credit me with being sincere in that, at least, my dear." Blakeslee's face softened for a moment. Then he went on, "The rest was the fortune of war. We needed a freight outfit with a passport to get the gold through Yuma. Somebody told us Mike came from Virginia, so we thought—"

"What have you done with Mike?" Kern cut in sharply.

Blakeslee's cold eyes flicked over him, but he directed his answer to Penny.

"Mike is alive," he said, and at her glad cry, he smiled grimly. "I'll prove it to you presently," he told her. "He's locked in the cabin over yonder. Unfortunately we approached Jeb before we found out that Mike is one of the few ex-Virginians who is

strong for the Union. By that time Jeb was one of us. But Mike got nosy, so some of the boys brought him out here for safekeeping.

"You must have tricked Jeb some way to get him to join your organization in the first place," said Penny contemptuously.

"It was easy," boasted Blakeslee. "A kid that age is always flattered by an invitation to join a secret society. But it wasn't so easy to keep him in line after he found out what kind of club he'd joined, and how deeply he'd gotten himself involved in our plans. I guess he felt trapped then and he began to drink. When he was drunk he threatened to tell what he knew. Then it became necessary for me to dispose of Brant, and I had the muzzle I needed for Jeb. By making him believe he was guilty of murder I kept him from going to the authorities with the story of our hollow wagon tongues. Yesterday I got it out of him that you were leaving for Yuma last night, so I knew the play was about over and made my plans accordingly."

"You *are* cold-blooded, aren't you Rand?" said Penny in bitter scorn.

Blakeslee shrugged. "In my business, Penny, you have to be—or you don't live long."

His finger tightened on the gun trigger. "And remember this, my dear—I'm going to get that gold through—no matter who gets in my way!"

"You're wasting time!" Gore, who'd waited impatiently in the background, stepped forward and made a grab for Penny's arm. "We oughta be collecting these pokes and hitting the trail with them fresh teams we got waiting. Only make up your mind—are you gonna shoot the lieutenant or bring him along?"

BLAKESLEE'S pale eyes gave the man a startled look. "Wait a minute," he said slowly. "Maybe I've been overworking something. It might not be such a bad idea to take the lieutenant along after all. He's known at Yuma—"

Blakeslee's tone was suddenly jubilant "That's what we'll do, Gore!" he said. "Have the boys put on the troopers' uniforms and use the cavalry saddles. They can ride escort, and with Lieutenant Devlin driving the lead wagon and Penny on the seat beside him to present her passport they'll let us through without so much as a look inside the wagons!"

Kern spoke then, infinite contempt in his voice. "What makes you think I'll keep quiet, even with a gun at my back?"

"I think you will, Lieutenant," said Blakeslee with his thin smile, "because the gun won't be at your back—it will be at Penny's!"

He jerked his head toward the stepping stones that crossed the creek to the grove of cottonwoods.

"Get going!" he ordered

Kern looked briefly at Penny, but she had turned away, her bronze head held high. He wished with all his heart he could tell her of his relief that she was not a Copperhead, of his love, of his shame that he had doubted her. Probably he'd never have the chance to tell her now, and maybe she wouldn't listen if he tried. Just because she'd denounced Blakeslee didn't mean there was any room in her heart for him.

Blakeslee's gun jabbed his back, and with a heavy heart he followed Penny across the stream. This was only a reprieve and he knew it. He'd have to find some way out before they left the Cottonwoods. After that he and Penny would be alone and helpless in the hands of Blakeslee and his Knights.

They came to the clearing with its cabin and stable built of gray boulders, and suddenly Kern stopped in his tracks, his lips compressed in a white and bitter face. Any hope he might have had of being aided by the troop in an attempted escape was blasted by the sight before him. Still figures dressed in Army blue lay sprawled grotesquely about, their blood dyeing the cottony white fuzz from the trees that carpeted the clearing.

Apparently the surprise of the ambush had been complete. A third of A Troop lay where they had fallen, cut from their saddles as they entered the clearing. There was no sign of the Mexicans or the rest of the troop.

"Too bad, Lieutenant," mocked Blakeslee's voice behind him, "but this is war. Probably some of them escaped our guns.

I ordered that any survivors be locked in the stable. You and Penny will join Mike here in the cabin until we're ready to leave. Gore will be just outside, so don't try any tricks."

Penny had been looking anxiously toward the cabin, and now she jerked free of Gore's grasp and hurried forward. Pushing back the heavy bar on the outside of the plank door, she disappeared inside, crying, "Mike! Mike! Where are you?"

Gore's gun was in Kern's ribs then and he followed Penny, walking numbly inside. He heard the plank door slammed shut behind him and the heavy bar shot into place, and he knew with a bitter finality that they were hopelessly trapped.

A SINGLE barred window on the opposite wall let a minimum of light and air into the shadowy, one-room cabin, and it took him a minute to locate the bunk in the corner and Mike standing beside it stroking Penny's hair as she sobbed against his chest. But even in the dim light, Kern was shocked at the change in Mike's appearance.

Big-framed like Jeb, Mike had been a robust, red-bearded giant of a man with a love of life and laughter in his brown eyes. The stooped skeleton standing for support against the post of the straw-filled bunk was a hollow-cheeked caricature of the old Mike. The life, the pride and dignity, had gone out of the dark eyes that were raised dully to Kern's face.

Kern felt a sudden ache in his throat as he went forward. "Mike!" he choked.

"It's all right, boy," Mike said slowly. "You've tried to help us out of this mess. I knew you would. It was the only thing that kept me sane this past month, after I found out that Jeb—"

He stopped, his face working.

"Mike, what have they told you about Jeb?" Kern demanded.

"They didn't need to tell me," said Mike harshly. "I found out for myself. The day I was to meet Jeb at the warehouse, I got there ahead of time. I thought I heard voices in the loft and went up the ladder as quietly as I could. Jeb and Rand Blakeslee were up there talking. By now you probably know what I learned in that loft—that a bunch of Copperheads calling themselves the Knights of the Pacific Slope were plotting to smuggle gold to the Confederacy in my wagons. Is it any wonder that I blew up then and there and got caught at my eavesdropping?"

Weakly, Mike sank down onto the bunk shaking his grizzled head. "But the thing I could hardly believe was that Jeb was one of their number. My boy—a traitor to his country!"

Mike dropped his head in his hands and Penny knelt beside him, her face tear-streaked as she laid her bronze head against his arm.

"Mike," said Kern quickly, "before you judge the kid there's more you should know." Then he told him what Blakeslee had said about Jeb's unwillingness to co-operate with the Knights when he learned their true purpose, of his efforts to escape his conscience in drink. Told him of Brant's murder and how Blakeslee had used it to enforce Jeb's silence.

"Jeb's young," Kern ended, "too young and foolhardy, unfortunately, to have recognized the Knights as a subversive group when they first approached him. But he's not a traitor at heart, Mike, he's—"

Kern broke off, listening. They all heard the sound then, and exchanged apprehensive glances. There was the scuff of boots approaching outside and the murmur of voices.

Then Gore's voice rose in an angry growl. "No, you can't!" he said. "The boss'll be leaving any minute now and he's taking 'em along!"

"I gotta right t'see my sister an' my ol' man," slurred the other voice. "Get outa my way!"

"It's Jeb!" whispered Penny, sudden excitement in her eyes.

"He'll be no good to us," said Mike hopelessly. "He's drunk—as usual!"

But Kern had moved quickly over beside the door, flattening himself against the wall. He knew his plan hadn't much chance of success, but he was going to try.

OUTSIDE, the bar rattled as though the two men struggled for its control, then

suddenly the door burst open and Jeb Calhoun lurched into the room. Bellowing like an angry bull, the shifty-eyed Gore followed. Instantly, Kern launched himself at the man, reaching for the stubbly throat, and they went down, threshing and rolling on the dirt floor.

Then Gore had him pinned on his back and Kern heard Penny scream, "Jeb—grab his gun!"

But Kern couldn't tell whether Jeb complied or not, because Gore's hairy hands were at his throat, and what little light the room held seemed to be growing dimmer. Then suddenly the big man slumped over sidewise without a sound, and pushing him off to get painfully to his feet, Kern saw Jeb standing over Gore with the man's gun clubbed in his hand.

"Nice timing, Jeb," panted Kern, then took a second look at the boy. There was something different about Jeb. Then he knew. The drunkenness had been only feigned this time. Jeb's amber eyes were clear and sober, and there was a business-like .44 slung from the belt across his hips.

He tossed Gore's gun to Kern. "I'm fighting on your side now, Lieutenant," he said quietly. But he looked at Mike as he said it, and something warm went swiftly through Kern at the glad light that came into Mike's eyes.

"You saw Major Woodworth before you left?" Kern asked quickly, holstering Gore's gun.

"Not on your life!" A crooked grin twisted Jeb's young mouth. "You see, you left the major's door open last night, Lieutenant. I wasn't too drunk to understand that I'm not guilty of the murder that Blakeslee tried to hang on me. But I knew if I stuck around there the major would lock me up for being a member of a Copperhead society. I'm willing to face that charge later, but—" Jeb patted the .44 at his hip—"right now I've got a score to settle with Rand Blakeslee!"

"I suspected you felt that way, Jebbie boy!" said Blakeslee's cold voice in the open door, and even as Jeb wheeled, clawing at the .44, the gun in Blakeslee's hand blazed twice. Kern heard Penny's scream, then he saw Jeb fall, his gun still holstered, a splotch of red spreading over his shirt front.

But Gore's gun was already in Kern's hand, and he fired twice as Blakeslee started across the room toward Penny. Blakeslee was hit but he kept coming, firing blindly in Kern's direction. A slug tore through Kern's left sleeve and he heard it lodge in the bunk post beside him. Then he dared not fire again for fear of hitting Penny. Blakeslee had grabbed her arm and was dragging her outside and into the first of the waiting wagons.

Kern heard the crack of the mulewhip punctuating Blakeslee's frantically profane shouts at the mules and saw the wagon lurch into motion even as he sprang to the door. Outside, Blakeslees's men were milling about the other wagon, some of them shouting directions as they mounted their horses, all of them apparently confused by the gunplay in the cabin.

The man nearest Kern had one foot in the stirrup and Kern flung himself forward, dragging the man to the ground. Then vaulting into the saddle, he spurred after the wagon.

Penny and Blakeslee were out of the Cottonwoods now and had gained the main trail, and Kern could hear the pop of the whip as Blakeslee urged the mules into a run.

Galloping after the careening wagon, Kern heard gunfire behind him and it sounded like carbines. But whatever was happening at the clearing was screened by the trees.

AHEAD, through the pucker of the wagon top, he could see Penny's white face turned toward him, and as his mount closed the distance between them, he prayed she'd be safe because he knew now what he must do. There was only one way to stop Blakeslee's mad flight, and raising his gun, Kern took careful aim at the head of the near wheeler and squeezed the trigger.

The animal dropped like a rock, and Kern sped a second slug between the ears of the pointer. The other four animals, panicked by these shots and Blakeslee's frenzied whipping, reared and lunged against their collars, but the dead weight of their fallen teammates slowed them down, veering them

into the embankment that rose on the right side of the trail. Then the freighter came to a lurching, scraping halt, tilted crazily against the side of the mountain.

Instantly Kern was off his horse, gun in hand, running toward the wagon. "Penny!" he cried frantically, "Penny!"

But it was a white-faced Rand Blakeslee who dropped unsteadily from the tilted wagon seat and stood braced against the wagon wheel as he raised his wavering gun and fired.

Kern's shot rang out simultaneously and Blakeslee slumped to the ground, his gun dropping from his fingers.

Kern walked over to pick up Blakeslee's gun, and stood for a moment looking down at him. There was still life in the pale eyes that stared back at him with the helpless, blazing hate of a wounded animal.

He heard a sob then, and Penny's bronze head appeared above him as she struggled to clamber from the tilted seat.

"Penny!" he cried and sprang forward to lift her down. "Are you all right, darling?"

"I think so," she said. Then she saw Blakeslee. "Kern, is he—dead?"

Kern shook his head. "Just out of the fight." He looked anxiously up-trail. "It's the others I'm worried about. They'll be here any minute."

He'd scarcely spoken when there were hoofbeats on the trail from the Cottonwoods. He looked at the sixgun in his hand, remembering suddenly that there was one shot left. Thrusting Penny behind him, Kern thumbed back the gun's hammer and waited.

Then he saw he wasn't going to need it. The first rider to round the bend in the trail was Major Woodworth. Behind him rode three men from B Troop. And that, thought Kern, would account for the carbine fire he'd thought he heard as he left the Cottonwoods.

Kern grinned. "You're just in time, sir," he said as Woodworth dismounted.

"Humph!" grunted Woodworth, eying Blakeslee, who was struggling to raise himself on one elbow. "Looks to me as though you're doing all right—you've downed our biggest game."

He spoke over his shoulder to the troopers, jerking his head at Blakeslee. "Do what you can for him. Then as soon as you've taken care of the team, get him into the wagon—I want him hauled back alive for a trial!"

Woodworth stepped toward the freighter. "Now let's have a look at that hidden gold."

"Of course, sir," said Kern. "But first I want you to know that Penny and her father had nothing to do with Blakeslee's scheme—"

"I know." Woodworth turned toward Penny and Kern saw that his flinty gray eyes were gravely gentle.

"YOUR BROTHER had courage, Miss Penny," he said. "He must have known he couldn't hope to survive a gunbattle with Blakeslee. Before he left town last night he wrote out a complete account of his own activities with the Knights, exonerating you and your father, and he sent it to me by messenger. He thought Blakeslee meant to lie in wait for you here at the Cottonwoods, so I assembled B Troop and followed as quickly as possible."

"I'm glad." Penny looked up at him, her amber eyes shining with unshed tears. "Mike's had more than his share of heartache over all this. But I know he'll feel as I do—if we had to lose Jeb it was better to lose him this way than to have him tried for treason."

Her chin went up then, as though she would put this sorrow behind her, and she managed a tremulous smile. "I suppose, Major, that the Knights were as surprised to see you as we were?"

Woodworth nodded. "We were filtering through the trees as your wagon left. Without Blakeslee there to lead 'em his men folded up like a tent."

He looked at Kern. "I dare say," he said drily, "that A Troop would have come through without our help. Just as we got there Sergeant Hitchcock and two of your boys—Timmons and O'Hare, I believe—had jumped their guards and started things popping over by the stable."

His gray gaze whipped back to Penny, and for the first time since he'd known the major, Kern saw a flush of embarrassment

creep slowly up the old officer's granite-like face.

"Miss Penny," he said gruffly, "I'm a soldier, not a diplomat, so I don't quite know how to say this. I had the wrong opinion of you in the beginning and I'm afraid I tried to poison this young man's mind against you. I apologize."

He turned to Kern.

"I can tell you she's a fine girl," he said savagely, as though Kern had denied it, "and you'd better ask her to marry you before some other young squirt gets the chance!"

Then he turned and began barking orders at the troopers.

Kern stole a glance at Penny, but her face was unreadable as a closed book as she started slowly back up the trail toward the Cottonwoods.

He fell into step beside her, his heart beginning to thud in his chest.

"Penny," he stammered, "I—I want more than anything in the world to take the major's advice. But after everything that's happened, I don't suppose there's any chance that you—"

He stopped miserably, and Penny shot him a sidelong glance.

"The last time you asked me to marry you, Kern, you made a much better beginning," she said demurely. "Or have you forgotten?"

They were out of sight of the others now, hidden by the bend in the trail, and Kern stopped, looking down at the girl quizzically.

"What did I say the last time?" he demanded

Penny took a step toward him, her soft lips trembling a little as she raised a rosy face to his.

"It wasn't what you said, Kern," she whispered, "it was what you did! Do you remember now?"

Kern's face crinkled suddenly in a happy grin. "Oh!" he said. Then his arms went around her and pulled her close. "How's this for a beginning?" he asked softly, and kissed her. ● ● ●

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By Ellis Sloan

There just had to be a . . .

Present From Joe

. . . even if Joe had to risk his life to give it to the kid

JOE HALLET stood on the porch of the Fandango saloon, a broom in his hand and a slop-bucket beside him. Thin and stoop-shouldered, he shivered in the chill morning air, peering with red-rimmed eyes at the kid who swung down at the hitch-rack.

"By damn," he said, softly. His wasted face lit in a smile. "If it ain't Ben Maynard's boy Johnny."

Grinning, Johnny came toward him. "It's been a long time, Joe. I wondered if you'd remember."

As he shook the kid's hand, Joe thought, I remember! In the saloons of a hundred towns since Kansas City hadn't he tried to forget the hard lamplight, that night in the Ruby Palace; the feel of the plank wall at his back; the grim circle of men's faces in front of him, as he stood there.

He had been a man, and gun-proud, until that night.

It had been the kid's father, Ben Maynard, who sided him. Ben, who brought him out of that circle alive. And died for it, with a bullet in his belly.

Joe looked at the kid. Tall, lean-shanked, suntanned; his square features shaded by the angled stetson—Ben's features. And the Colt .44 slung in the tied-down holster, like Ben had worn it. "I don't forget," Joe said softly.

There was an embarrassed silence. Johnny looked down at the bucket. His gray eyes came up, traveling Joe's gaunt form, unease on his haggard face. "For a while there, I used to hear about you. Joe, did you ever try—"

Joe nodded. He said, wryly, "I'd have it licked, son, except they make the stuff faster than I can drink it." His glance evaded the kid. But he brightened as he asked, "What brings you to Three Wells, Johnny?"

"A girl, name of Anne Wilson. She came here from Kansas City six months ago. Do you know her?"

"An old boozer like me?" Joe asked, gruffly. "But I've seen her around town—she sure is pretty. Come to live with her cousin Effie, and Doc Townsend. Doc's place is just across the arroyo bridge, north of town." Joe studied the kid speculatively. "You're hardly dry behind the ears, Johnny. You figure on sparking Anne Wilson?"

Johnny Maynard laughed. "Hell, no. I'm going to marry her."

The swamper ran a gnarled hand through wispy gray hair. "Well, now," he said, wonderingly. "What do you think of that?" He grinned broadly. "Seems like only yesterday you was a tiny sprout no higher'n a boot. And now you're going to get married."

HIS GLANCE returned to the gun in Johnny's holster, and sudden worry took the grin from his face. "You got any particular call carrying that hardware, Johnny?" he asked nervously. "I mean, a man about to get hisself hitched—"

Johnny laughed again. But he shook his head, looking down at the gun, "Dad's," he said. "Mostly for show. A man riding strange country doesn't know what he'll meet up with." He sounded young, a little sheepish. He shifted his feet, "I never did throw down on a man yet," he confided, self-consciously.

The kid wouldn't die like his father.

Joe was relieved. His grin returned. He said, remembering, "You was the shyest little cuss I ever did see. You've changed some, Johnny."

"Knowing Anne did that," Johnny reached in his shirt pocket for the sack of Durham, and built himself a cigarette. "Anne was someone I could tie to," he said, quietly. "Before that, I was like a scared maverick. With Dad gone, I figured I hadn't a friend in the world." He paused, embarrassed by this revelation. "Excepting maybe you," he added then, quickly.

Joe looked away, down Main Street. "I was no friend," he said, "drinking myself senseless, when a kid needed me." He cleared his throat. He said, roughly, "Well, you growed up fine, Johnny. I was always sorry—"

"Never mind, Joe." Johnny thumbed a match to flame, lit the quirly. Inhaling, he let the smoke out slowly. He flicked the match into the dust. "I understand," he said.

Joe slumped against a post. "I doubt if you do." His old feeling of guilt drove him. "Your Ma dead. Then Ben—and me leaving you with strangers." He shook his head, recalling how he had left the ranch in western Kansas. . . .

It had been his doing, that Ben had come along on the cattle drive, and been with him, that night in the Ruby Palace. "Nothing in town I want to see," Ben had declared the evening before, as they'd sat on the veranda smoking. "You close the deal in Kansas City. Them longhorns have played hell with the fences," he'd added, seriously. Strays had broken through in some spots, and new wire was needed around the stacks, to protect the feed for winter. "I'll just take me a day or two while you're gone and fix 'em."

Ben had spoken quietly. It was six months since his wife Molly had died—but there was still the kid, Johnny, to think of. And Ben had always been the one to keep the ranch

up. The one who worried.

Joe didn't have a wife, or a child. And he never worried, except maybe when his kidneys bothered him, after a hard day riding roundup. Or about the price of beef. With current beef prices soaring, they stood to make plenty, this year's gather.

Joe had felt like celebrating. "Come with me, Ben," he'd urged. "After the work we put in, you need a little vacation."

Ben would have stayed home with the kid But Joe had talked him into going. And in Kansas City, with the deal over, Joe had got blind drunk. So drunk that he'd wound up in trouble. . . .

It had been cold, the morning they brought Ben Maynard back to the ranch. Hoar frost silvered the grama grass, and their boots made a crunching sound as they lifted his plain wood coffin from the wagon, and carried it to the house.

Joe hadn't been able to face the kid. He didn't see how he could tell Johnny the way Ben had died. With the kid still asleep, and with Ben lying there silent in the parlor, Joe had gotten on his horse and ridden away from the ranch.

But he'd never been able to ride long enough, nor far enough.

JOE TORE his gaze from the growing glare of Main Street. He looked at the kid, and misery contorted the lines of his face. "Your Dad and me was more than partners, Johnny. He was my friend. It was my fault he died. I—"

Johnny faced him angrily. "Don't be a damned fool, Joe." His voice rose with emotion. "It happened—years ago. But you got to go on living, I learned that. You got to forget." He turned to go.

Joe stood, still leaning against the pillar, the broom in his hand. Finally he straightened. "I've thought about it," he said.

He didn't see Blacky Spain until the gambler tripped over the slop bucket.

The big, black-browed man had come along the boardwalk, and onto the porch, as they talked. Joe spun at the sound of the gambler's snarled oath, and his face went pale as he looked down at him, sprawled in the slop water.

"I'm sorry," Joe said. He knew about Blacky Spain. He glanced at the wet porch where he'd swept, and shook his head. "Them boards is wore slick," he said, nervously. "I keep telling Kurt Bauer he ought to—"

"You dirty, drunken son," Blacky got to his feet. He was broad and tall, and he wore a Derringer slung beneath his Prince Albert coat. He had on city pants, and a white shirt with a string tie. His clothes were soaked and dripping. "Leaving a full bucket where a man could kill himself. Mister, I'm going to teach you a lesson."

He reached out and grabbed Joe by the shirt front, and shook his frail body like a sack of soiled clothing. Then his huge fist came up in a smashing blow to Joe's face.

The swamper gave a cry of pain. Blood ran from his lips, and he raised a thin arm to shield his face. He tried to twist free of the big man's grip, but his feeble strength failed him.

He saw the gambler bring up his fist to strike again, and then the kid reached his side. Joe cried, "No, Johnny—no!" But Johnny clamped a long arm across the big man's chest, pulling him backward, spinning him around. Joe gave a warning shout as the gambler went for his gun.

He saw Johnny grab Blacky's hand as the Derringer cleared leather. The bullet creased Johnny's leg, burying itself in the planking. But the kid hung on, forcing the gun down, while Blacky Spain swore.

Shaken, Joe stood wiping the blood from his face, watching tensely as the two men grappled. Johnny wrested the gun from the gambler's grasp, and it fell clattering to the porch floor. Joe kicked it aside.

The big man tore free of Johnny's arms, backed away. "Now bucko," he said, and spat. He lunged at Johnny, his fists swinging.

There was nothing Joe could do but watch, as Johnny stood his ground, matching Blacky blow for blow. They moved to the street, dust rising in a cloud around them as they fought. And with each blow, as the kid's fists thudded against solid flesh, Joe winced.

Because of him, Ben Maynard had been shot by a crooked dealer; and now it was

Johnny siding him. With a desperate, sinking feeling, Joe wished he were dead. For Blacky was no common fist fighter. He was a killer.

Joe stood taut, aware of the crowd that was forming, watching as the gambler, swearing, closed in on Johnny. With sudden, animal cunning, he brought a boot up into Johnny's stomach. It was a vicious blow that knocked the wind out of Johnny.

THE KID sank to one knee, and pain showed on his face. There was a low noise from the circle of watchers, and a slow smile spread on Blacky's face as he came forward. He slugged Johnny on the side of the head. But the kid staggered to his feet. He

stood swaying, his arms covering his face.

Joe tensed, feeling Johnny's struggle as the kid shook his head in an effort to clear his vision. He could hear the rasping intake of Johnny's lungs, trying to recover his breath, as he fought for time. The kid straightened as Blacky rushed in, pressing for the kill.

Then it happened, a thing Joe was to remember for a long time. As Blacky charged, Johnny met him with a hard right to the jaw. A blow packed with the sheer power of desperation, one that landed like dynamite.

It stopped the big man in his tracks. He spun outward, groggy and off balance. When, with perfect timing, Johnny's last blow hit him it was something to see. For Blacky Spain's face carried an expression of complete disbelief, the moment before his knees folded, and he dropped unconscious to the dust.

Johnny stood for a moment breathing deeply, looking down at the gambler. Then, ignoring the crowd, he picked up his hat and walked over to Joe's side. "I guess that does it," he remarked, coolly. "I've got to get on —Anne will be waiting."

Joe walked with him to the hitch-rack. "You shouldn't have done it, Johnny," he said, morosely. He shook his head, not wanting to tell Johnny, but knowing the kid should be warned. "You shouldn't never have fought him," he repeated, lamely. "That Blacky is a bad hombre."

"Quit your fussing," the kid laughed, not understanding. "That tinhorn's too handy with his fists. I figure he's had it coming." Johnny swung to saddle. "See you in church," he said, grinning. He rode off down the street.

The swamper watched him until he disappeared across the arroyo bridge, traveling at a gallop toward Doc Townsend's. . . .

Joe turned back to the saloon. The crowd had already scattered, and he could see that Blacky was coming to. "No use me trying to dodge him," he thought, dully. He shambled past the gambler, expecting at any moment to hear his name called. Feeling that cold, crawling sensation between his shoulder blades that had always warned him when a bullet could come whistling at his back.

There had been a time, he recalled, when all this would have been different. When he never was caught without the sixgun that now hung, dust-covered, in his room in back of the bar. A time when he would have laughed at a skunk like Blacky, and outdrawn him when he made his grab.

But that was before Ben had been killed. Now Joe felt old and tired. He was sweating with fear as he stepped onto the porch.

"You got a genius for making trouble," Kurt Bauer growled. The fat saloonkeeper stood white-aproned in the batwings. His thick-jowled head moved from side to side.

"That kid has a lucky punch. But I wouldn't give you a nickel for his chances, when—"

"Kurt, you talk too damned much," Joe pushed past him, going toward the bar. He had to have a drink. Suddenly, it seemed as if his whole body cried for liquor.

Bauer swung on him angrily. "Don't give me no guff, swamper, or you'll find yourself in the street." His eyes narrowed. "Get out there and finish washing down that porch. You ain't bumming no drinks from me this early."

Joe halted, looking at Bauer, his face taut with shamed pride. He could feel himself trembling—hating the sodden, wasted years that had brought him to this stinking barroom; despising this man in the dirty apron who symbolized his defeat.

He straightened. "Why, you—" he began. But his sick craving made him weak, robbing him of even rebellion. His bloodshot eyes wavered. He turned and walked toward the door.

As he stepped onto the porch, Joe almost collided with Blacky Spain. The gambler's face was streaked with blood, and his jaw was swollen where Johnny's punch had landed. He put out a hand to steady himself, blocking Joe's path, glaring down at him.

"I don't take to fist fighting," he said, slowly. "Tell your friend I'll be looking for him." He pulled back his coat, showing the hide-out gun he'd returned to its high holster. "Next time we'll fight my way."

Joe felt a cold, reckless fury rising in him, but he tried to control it. "Johnny's no gunfighter," he pleaded. "He's only a kid, come here to get married. You got no call—"

"Old enough to die, ain't he?" The gambler's lips twisted in a vicious smile. "There won't be no groom at that wedding." He turned his back on Joe, and started to walk away.

Suddenly, Joe called after the gambler, "Damn you, you ain't gunning that kid—I'll kill you first."

Blacky turned, his face showing surprise. But then he burst out laughing. "A drunken saddlebum," he nodded. His big frame shook with laughter. Still chuckling with amusement, he went down the street toward Big Duke's gambling hall.

LATE THAT evening Joe came up the alley beside the Fandango saloon, and let himself in at the back door. The smell of dead cigar smoke and stale beer struck him as he stepped into the hall. Through the thin planking he could hear the chink of glasses, and the voice of a drunken cowboy singing. He felt his way along the black passage to his room in back of the bar.

He closed the door, and groping in the dark toward the packing case he used for a table, lit the candle he kept there, stuck in the top of a whisky bottle. He sank down on the sagging cot against the far wall.

He was tired—more tired than he'd ever been in his life. He hadn't taken a drink, either, the whole damned night.

He had been standing in the street for hours, moving every now and then in the shadows between yellow-dusted patches of lamplight—watching Blacky Spain as he strode from one saloon to another.

And Joe had watched for the kid, alert at the sight of any young rider swinging down at some moonlit hitch-rack. Straining for any sign of Johnny—but there had been none.

Joe took off his boots, and tried to rub the soreness out of his feet. His hands were shaking, and he recalled that he hadn't spent a night without a drink of whisky in a long time. In fact, he usually came to this room dead drunk, to fall on his bed in a stupor that lasted until Kurt Bauer roused him in the morning.

But tonight he had been too worried about Johnny to let himself drink. He couldn't let the kid down again.

It did no good telling himself that he'd tried to warn Johnny, not even if the kid were to take him seriously. When Johnny came to town, Blacky would kill him.

Joe realized he had to do something. But tonight, watching the gambler, he had wondered if he still had the nerve to face a man like Blacky in a showdown.

He got up off the bed and took down his gunbelt from a peg on the wall. He blew the dust from it, taking pleasure as he always had in the smooth animal feel of its leather as he buckled it on. It hung right. His hand went to the notched gunbutt. He slid the .44 from holster, hefting it, returning it to leather.

Then he tried a couple of quick draws.

When he sat down on the bed again, he was sweating.

It wasn't as though he was gutless, Joe told himself. After all, he'd traveled the smoke trail long before Ben and he were partners.

He had felt the tense hush of expectancy that came over a place; known the presence of death, as he drew. And smelled the rank odor of powdersmoke as it rose from his gun, while he looked down at a dead man at his feet.

He had been lucky. But he'd always known that the dead man could have been himself. . . .

No—he hadn't exactly lost his nerve. But the years, and liquor, had told on him. His shaky hands weren't as fast as they used to be. He knew Blacky could outdraw him. And dead, he'd be of no use to the kid, Joe told himself.

He sat thinking about it, and a picture kept coming into his mind like a dream. He was standing in a long, low-ceilinged room. It was early morning, and the air in the room was still and cold. And at the end of the long room, in front of the windows, lay Ben's coffin. . . .

The sound of coarse laughter came from the saloon. And from somewhere down the street came the jangle of a tin-pan piano, its off-key music drifting on the night air. The piano was playing a sad song.

Shivering, Joe blew out the candle and lay down on the bed.

JOE WAS polishing the brass footrail that ran the length of the Fandango's long bar, when Doc Townsend burst through the batwings and hollered, "Rise and shine!" Red-faced and cheerful, the little medico laughed as he put down his worn leather bag and came briskly across the saloon.

Joe peered up at him sourly. He grumbled, "You'd think a man who'd like as not spent the night cutting up some poor devil would be a little more pious in the morning." He tossed his rag into the pail of salt and got to his feet, groaning. "How's Johnny?"

Doc ignored the question. He squinted at Joe. "Rheumatism, Joe," he declared, finally. "Clear as the nose on your face. Quit drinking." He motioned to Kurt Bauer to bring him a whisky. Nobody in Three Wells was surprised to see Doc drinking in the morning. He turned to Joe.

"Now you take this tonic I give Joss McCollough. Very interesting result—very. Old Joss crippled up something terrible with rheumatism, and all. Well sir, I gave him this common ordinary everyday sulphur and molass—"

"Yeah," Joe nodded impatiently. "Say, Doc, how's the kid? How's Johnny?" He tried to sound casual.

"Well now," Doc Townsend hated to be interrupted. "Didn't know you knew the boy. Stayed the night. Fine young man. You take a bright young man like that, ought to make Anne a good husband."

Doc gulped down his whisky and shuddered slightly. "He seemed normal enough at breakfast," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"Johnny coming into town today, do you know?"

Doc nodded. "He and Anne will be coming in to see the preacher. Then there's that spread I been telling them about, up Lost Creek way. They'll want to look up title to

In the next issue

PONY MAIL FOR PRESCOTT

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

and many other stories of action and romance

it." Doc grinned. "Don't know as I blame Johnny being a trifle impatient to get the wedding date settled. Anne is one pretty filly."

Doc tossed some silver on the bar, and crossing to the door, picked up his bag. He turned, one hand on the batwings. "You'd better drop around and see me, Joe," he said, seriously. "You're looking poorly." He pushed briskly out into the street.

Joe turned and leaned against the bar. He'd slept hardly at all the night before, and his hands were still shaking. There was a chill, sick feeling rising in him that was close to panic. His nerves, he thought. Maybe the Doc was right—maybe something was wrong with him. He probably needed a tonic, or something.

Johnny hadn't even told Doc Townsend about his fight with the gambler. When he came into Three Wells with Anne, Blacky would be waiting. . . .

Joe looked up at Kurt Bauer. "Give me a drink," he said, softly.

He was surprised when the fat saloonkeeper came down the bar, and poured out two brimming shot glasses of whisky. Kurt lifted one of the glasses. "On the house," he commented. "Something tells me you're going to need it, mister."

Joe looked up to see him sneering.

A man had his limits, Joe was thinking. There were times, come hell or high water, when you rode the river. This was one of them.

He pushed the drink away from him. "I've drunk a lot of your liquor," he said, quietly, "but I've paid for it. And I never drank with you." He turned away from the bar.

Kurt Bauer grew red in the face. He yelled at Joe. "You're fired, swamper," he raged, "Get out!"

Joe didn't answer. He kept on walking to his room in back of the bar.

THE NOONDAY sun cast its brassy glare on the thick dust of Main Street, when Joe pushed through the Fandango's batwings and dumped his bedroll down on the porch.

He stood erect now, a quiet determination about him, as he peered in the direction of Big Duke's gambling hall. Somewhere, down that row of false-fronted buildings with their weathered awnings, Blacky loitered, sure of his gun hand—waiting for Johnny to show.

Blacky was lightning with a gun. A man died when he drew—died before he got gun from holster. Joe had seen it happen.

Blacky was young, and fast—and Joe was old, and shaky.

But he hadn't lived this long without learning a few tricks, Joe was thinking. A grim smile pulled at the corners of his mouth as he recalled something from his years on the gunsmoke trail. "Might do," he muttered to himself, softly.

He wore his gunbelt, and now he felt again the comfort of its old leather. His fingers touched the worn holster, and he shifted it slightly, feeling the weight of the sixgun, his hand hovering above the butt.

He turned his head and squinted into the distance past the arroyo bridge at the end of Main Street. Through the shimmering heat waves, up the road near Doc Townsend's place, he could see a buckboard coming slowly toward town. There wasn't much time.

He reached out and caught the arm of the Mexican child who ran past him. "Go find Blacky Spain," he said. "Tell him Joe Hallet's gunning for him." He clamped a silver dollar in the urchin's hand, and turned him loose.

The boy looked up at him with wide button eyes, and his mouth dropped open. Clutching the silver, he turned and ran hell for leather down the street. He disappeared in the doorway of Big Duke's gambling hall. . . .

Like old times, Joe mused grimly.

He peered at Blacky, standing yonder beside the gray, battered buildings, ready for him to make his play. There was the long expanse of hot, glaring emptiness between them. A sudden hush of absolute silence had come over the street. And the feeling—like no feeling at all; like time suspended.

Joe took a deep breath. He started walking toward Blacky. Slowly, smelling the scorched dust as it gave ankle-deep beneath the steady thrust of his boots.

He came within range. It had to be close, he thought.

He kept on walking, closing the firing dis-

tance between him and the gambler, watching Blacky's hard, still face, until finally he saw the dark brows draw faintly together. Blacky would take no chances—

He stopped.

Now the gambler stood no more than twenty feet away, a confident leer on his face. He had lowered his holster, and his fingers swung idly above the pearl handle of the Derringer. His lips moved, "You crazy, swamper? Make your grab, and see what happens." He laughed.

Joe didn't answer. Calmly, he waited, his old eyes alert on Blacky. Seeing the gambler's face go strained. Time grew taut. . . .

Joe's hand flashed back and down—and stayed there. Barely swiveling, his sixgun blasted from holster. His first shot exploded at Blacky's feet before the gambler's gun cleared leather.

Panic flashed in Blacky's face as he triggered the Derringer, its lead screaming, caroming wildly. And in the split second that followed, his fear became a horrible mask.

ALMOST CASUALLY, Joe drew his gun from holster, took careful aim, and fired.

Blacky lurched sideways and clutched at his breast. Blood came from his lips, and he coughed. His eyes wide and grotesquely staring, he pitched forward to the dust. He lay still.

Joe stood for a moment regarding the dead man, aware of the noise around him as doors and shutters opened. The street filled with people.

They stared down at Blacky's body, speaking in awed voices of Joe's gunplay. "Deader'n a mackerel," a puncher said, wonderingly. "I'll be damned!" He shook his head, looking up at Joe with respect.

Joe turned and went through the crowd. A buckboard had drawn up in the street, and he saw Johnny striding toward him. He grinned. "Hi, Johnny," he said. "You're late for the funeral."

Johnny glanced at the crowd, and then back at Joe, slowly. "You and Blacky—" he said, unevenly. "It wasn't till I got to thinking—"

"Forget it, kid," Joe said roughly. He smiled, "That was your advice to me, remember?"

(Advt.)

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Johnny was silent.

Looking at him, Joe could feel the warmth that had kindled in his clear eyes. The kid said, casually. "Anne and I have been doing some figuring, Joe. I'll be needing a partner, when we get our spread—the kind a fellow would pick to ride the river with. I mentioned to Anne that you might be interested."

Suddenly, Joe couldn't trust his voice to answer. He turned to see Anne Wilson coming toward them from the buckboard. At this moment he felt almost as lucky as the kid.

Anne smiled gently at Joe as she came up to them. She peered past them at the crowd around the dead gambler. Taking Johnny's arm, she looked up at him anxiously. "Who is it?" she asked, "Do you know what happened?"

Johnny's eyes were still on Joe. "Blacky Spain was gunning for me," he answered. "I'm no great shakes with a gun, Anne. Joe knew it." He looked down at her. "What happened was sort of a wedding present—a present from Joe," he said, softly. ●●●

DARK JOURNEY

By Talmage Powell

HE SLID out of the waters of the creek like a lean, hungry cat. It was night, with Texas stars glittering in the black blanket overhead. More important, the night was silent. The dogs and men were no longer behind him, thirsty for his blood.

Exhausted and dirty as he was, Frank Donovan experienced a moment of exultation. The past hours lay like a gray fog in his mind. During those hours he had moved and breathed with a grim desire to live, but with little hope of making the escape a

Frank's shackles were never so heavy as they were after he'd shucked them. . . .

Donovan built a fire, and started the coffee boiling

success. He had been like a hunted animal, motivated only by its primordial instinct to run, to put distance between itself and the cold, yawning cage. But now, like a flicker of feeble light, hope was beginning to stir in Donovan's brain and feelings. The possibility of see Glory again, touching her hands, her lips, drove him to his feet, lurched him down-creek with a wild laugh.

The break itself had been a fluke, an incident arranged by a droll pixie of fate. Two guards had stood watch over the road gang of half a dozen convicts. With a long-handled shovel, Frank had been digging loose a six-pound stone when the guard nearest him had half turned to shout to the guard up the road. Without thought or conscious volition, Frank had straightened and hurled the stone in one lightning motion. The rock had slammed the guard hard on the shoulder, knocking him down. With cougar-like grace, Frank had dropped over the rim of the gully as the second guard's shotgun had blasted.

There'd been swampy land ahead covered by a tangle of underbrush, where a man could lose himself, hide until the sinking sun dropped behind the bluffs in the west. He'd heard a second shot from the guard's shotgun. A man had whooped, which meant the break had become a small riot. Frank realized he must have been counting on that, too.

Then the underbrush had swallowed him as he left confusion behind. He'd known this was but the beginning, that a general alarm would round up most, perhaps all, of the convicts. Dogs and men would hunt human prey, and he might spend the next month in solitary. The odds had favored the other side with men, guns, equipment; but against these Donovan had pitted the hardened body and trail wisdom accumulated in twenty-four years of life spent mostly outdoors, an iron-ridged belly capable of withstanding hunger, and a heart that refused to quit.

Now, after the sun had marched twice across the heavens, Donovan dared believe he might have won the first round. The cost had been heavy. His muscles were sucked dry of strength, his brain fatigued with fear and constant alertness. And the hunger, assuaged only by wild berries and some vegetables taken from a nester's garden under cover of night, was a roaring demon inside him.

He reached a slope shadowed by a stand of oaks. He stumbled once as he staggered to the crest, and then he was looking down at a moon-toned scene that put a lump in his throat and brought a blur to his eyes. He saw a long, fallow meadow, the cabin standing at its head, a low, solid structure of logs hewn by his own hands.

EVEN THE HUNGER faded before this new hollowness that took possession of him. Here was the past and all its dreams. A small spread, watered by his sweat, a house snug against the roaring northers. A house built for Glory, never quite complete because it had never known her warm presence. Three years ago the dream had died, after Cort McCullens' gunslinging ramrod had bled out his life beneath the cottonwood at the east corner of the house. Three years ago—when the iron gate of the state pen had clanged shut behind Donovan, like a bell ringing a clear note of doom.

With Indian wariness, Donovan scouted the house, fighting the bitter memories aroused by every blade of grass here. He was reasonably sure they would never look for him here, never expect him to return like a homing pigeon. But he wasn't taking chances. He was a full thirty minutes working his way close to the house, noting the condition of the fields and fences. His lips were tight. Cort McCullens must be using the grazing land. Everything looked to be in fair repair.

He opened the plank door on its leather hinges, pausing and listening, wondering if the house had been ransacked of the clothes he'd left hanging in the bedroom and of the few dollars tucked behind the loose stone in the fireplace.

Something was wrong. He didn't know what, but the edges of his senses felt something amiss. Hackles crawled on the back of his neck, across his scalp. And then it struck him that the house did not have the

musty smell of a place long unoccupied. Instead, there was the clean, bright smell of soap, of a place being lived in.

He heard the whisper of a footstep, and he whirled, a cornered animal ready to kill blindly for survival.

"Frank!"

The whisper was like a memory out of a lost, dead dream. He stood shaken, sweat breaking on his face, wondering if he were hearing things.

He smelled the sweet perfume she used sometimes before he saw her darker shadow in the darkness.

Their two shadows melted together, becoming one. Frank touched her arms, her shoulders, knowing he would die of the sweet pain tearing through him. He could feel the wild strength of her arms about his neck and the wetness of tears on her cheek as she pressed her face to his.

"I knew you would come, Frank. All the others said you'd never be fool enough to head this way. Sheriff Tennessee Crowder watched the place last night and today, and then gave the job up. He never knew I was watching, too, ready to warn you if I saw sign of your coming too soon."

A shaft of moonlight filtered through the window, touching Donovan's gaunt, stubbled face. A sob caught in Glory's throat as she touched the face with her palm. "You're not thinking of facing Cort McCullens, Frank?"

"No," he gentled the fear from her. "Cort deserves trouble for what he did to me, but I'll not make it for him. I want just one thing, Glory. To take you to Mexico and start a new life."

"The old life seemed pretty good once, Frank."

UNTIL Cort McCullens decided I wasn't to have breathing room. Every word I said in court that day was true, Glory. Cort sent his man here deliberately to pick a fight and gun me down. He drew fast and shot. If his horse hadn't skitted I'd be a dead man. He didn't get a chance to shoot again, because I was fighting for my life.

"Everything Cort said at the trial was a lie. He didn't see the fight. I wasn't drinking, and I didn't start it. Every man jack on the jury knew he was lying. But it was Cort McCullens talking and the little men were afraid of him. They couldn't stomach hanging a guiltless man, but they had to make a gesture to Cort. So I drew five years for manslaughter. Five years ripped out of my life, shot to plain hell! I hope the little men have been able to sleep well."

"They haven't," Glory said quietly. "Your sacrifice hasn't been for nothing, Frank. Your shadow has lain over the little people, giving them no rest, until they've stiffened against Cort McCullens. He's not the power he was three years ago when you were sent away. The land has changed. Another two or three years and Cort McCullens will be finished, pushed back to the land he legally owns, no longer able to hold the public-domain land against settlers."

"Powerful enough still to use my lands, my house," Frank said bitterly.

"No, Frank. Boys from our place have taken care of the land—and I've taken care of the house." A sob caught in her throat. She moved to the window, framed in moonlight. "I've come here to this empty house to clean it and care for it as if it were mine, just the way we planned. The emptiness and loneliness has been terrible, Frank. When it got so I couldn't stand it, I'd interrupt my cleaning to go to the front door and imagine you coming across the fields, shirt open halfway down your chest, sweating from your labors, giving me a wave and smile and wanting to know what was for dinner." Glory laughed mirthlessly at herself. "Crazy of me, wasn't it?"

The vision of her waiting in the cabin doorway flamed in Donovan's mind. A wave of black hatred for a world that had separated them rolled over him. He stood clenching and unclenching his hands. "Glory, I'm going to give you the best living Mexico has to offer. Nothing will be too good—"

"Don't say it, Frank! I want only two things. Your freedom, and our peace."

"I've got my freedom."

"You can't have one without the other." She came back to him, pressed her cheek

against his chest. "Go back, Frank! Don't destroy us. We'll never really be free this way—a hunted man and his woman, running, forever running. But never able to escape the shadow hanging over them."

He fought the touch of her flesh and the pull of her words like a swimmer fighting a strong river current. Every cell of his being cried out at the injustice that had been done him. She must understand. He would make her understand.

"We're going to Mexico, Glory. And God help the man who tries to stop us."

OLD MAN Julius Silvers was plowing a piece of bottomland in the growing heat of the early morning sun. Reaching the end of a furrow, the stooped, bony patriarch stopped his mule, took off his floppy hat, and wiped his brow. When he lowered the bandanna across his eyes, he froze in his tracks. Before him a tall, gaunt man had stepped from the underbrush at the edge of the field.

"Frank Donovan!"

"Hello, Jule." Donovan frowned. "No call for you to tremble like that. It's the same Frank Donovan who helped you doctor a sick calf to life."

"Why, sure, Frank. Heard you had busted out. But you can't stay in these parts. Why, man—"

"Save it," Frank cut in. Looking at the old man, he felt a knot form inside of him. Old Julius had once been one of his firmest friends. But now the old man was only eager to get him away from here, to remove the threat of hunting lawdogs, shooting, bloodshed perhaps. It was as if something from a dark, strange world had come crashing into Silvers's normal, sane, peaceful world.

Tight-lipped, Frank said, "You still marrying folks?"

"Still a justice," Silvers admitted. He managed a weak laugh. "Ain't figuring—"

"Sure am. Come on, Glory," he called.

Glory came out of the underbrush, leading two horses.

"Let's go up to the house," Frank said, hating the way Silvers licked his lips, the fear that was showing in the man's eyes.

Frank had caught some sleep, washed, put on clean clothes, strapped a sixgun that had been locked in a trunk in this house around his middle. Silvers weakly tried to make friendly conversation as they walked to his house, which was set at the base of a knoll.

"Who's here?" Frank asked.

"Just me, Elda, and our boy."

"Good. We can have witnesses."

"Frank—"

"Yes, Jule?"

"My wife and boy—"

"You don't have to worry. Nobody's going to get hurt. I'm still the same Frank Donovan."

"Sure, Frank, sure. I didn't mean to rile you. Come in."

Sounds of entry into the front room brought Elda Silvers and a fourteen-year-old boy out of the kitchen. At the sight of Frank Elda went white, instinctively placing herself between Frank and her boy.

The creases deeper in his face, Frank said, "Good morning, Mrs. Silvers."

She swallowed. "Howdy, Frank." She shot a worried, questioning glance at her husband. He said quickly, "Got a wedding to perform. Right pleasant task to start the day, eh, Ma?"

"Y—yes."

"Listen," Frank said, "quit cowering. I'm Frank Donovan—your neighbor, remember? Donovan, the farmer." He sounded as if he were telling himself.

Julius said, "Ma, fetch the proper papers."

Julius put on his glasses, filled in the license, had them sign it. Then he instructed Frank and Glory to stand together before the fireplace. Frank took Glory's hand in his. It was cold. He tilted her chin up with his fingers. She forced a smile.

Julius read the ceremony, finished with: "Usual for me to kiss the bride."

He leaned forward, pecked Glory on the cheek. For a moment she clung to the old man. Elda Silvers reached out as if she would touch Glory. Then the old lady burst into tears.

Donovan stood with a trembling running over him. "Stop it!"

They looked at him, drew away from him. He pulled out a tattered bill from his pocket.

"You don't have to pay me, Frank," Julius said.

"Yes," Frank said thinly. "I do have to pay you." He forced the bill in the old, wrinkled hand, said, "Come on. You're riding with us a spell."

Elda Silvers moved forward. Donovan cut her a glance. "I'm not going to harm him. I just can't take chances of you running straight to town for the sheriff."

The boy, with bunched fists, took a step. "No stinking outlaw on the run is taking my daddy!"

Elda moved between them. "He didn't mean that, Frank!"

"Then he should keep his mouth shut."

"Ride with them, Jule," Elda said. "Ride in peace."

SHORTLY after midday, Frank made the old man dismount. With a slap of his hand, Frank sent Jule's horse running.

"He'll find his way home. It'll be a long walk, but it won't hurt you," Frank said. "It'll give us plenty of time to put distance behind us."

Julius gave Frank a cold, pointed response of silence. Then he turned toward Glory. "God bless you, girl," he said in pity.

Frank felt his jaw muscles tighten. "Let's go, Glory. We've got a long ride."

The silence, and the heat of the day, and a horrible, bitter sense of injustice crawled through Donovan.

He glanced at Glory as they rode. "You didn't have to go through with it."

"But I did. We're married. That's what counts. Please don't talk about it, Frank."

Something had happened to Glory. The light had gone out of her face. . . .

Where a stream flowed, they stopped for the horses to drink.

"We'll have to push on fast," Frank said. "I want to make Yadkin's place by night."

"Yadkin?"

"Karl Yadkin. He did time with me. Finished his sentence six months ago. He told me once that he knew people in Mexico, had connections. Said if I ever needed help to see him."

In the last red rays of dying day, they reached the Yadkin place, a low squat house at the forks of two creeks, as Yadkin had once told Frank.

Diamonds of water flew into the air as the horses crossed Crazy Cow creek, the northern stream.

They drew rein. "Hello the house!" Frank called.

The door opened, revealing a man with a rifle in his hands. He was slender and hard-bodied, with a long, lean, coldly handsome face. He was not Yadkin, who Frank remembered as a heavy, slow-moving man.

"What do you want?"

"Looking for Karl Yadkin."

The man stepped into the yard, his gaze resting on Glory. "I'm Radek, Yadkin's sidekick. You can talk to me."

"I'll talk to Yadkin."

Yadkin appeared in the doorway, filling it with his bulk. "Donovan!"

Frank caught the inflection of his name. Every time his name was spoken that same inflection of slight disbelief was used.

"I remembered what you said to me, Karl."

"And I meant it. Come in, Frank." He gestured at Radek. "Take care of their horses."

"If you're sure they're all right."

"They're all right," Yadkin laughed. "Spot Frank Donovan must be in right now he'll have stray sheriffs for breakfast!" Yadkin held the door wide, standing aside as Frank and Glory entered. "How'd you manage it, Frank? It had to be a bust-out."

"I was lucky."

"And quick with your brains, hands, and feet," Yadkin guessed. "That's what I always liked about you, Frank. How's for some grub?"

"We can use it. Karl, my wife Glory. Glory, Karl Yadkin."

"Wife?" Yadkin said. And then he recovered his sleepy smile quickly. "Of course. How are you, Mrs. Donovan?"

YADKIN showed her to the back porch where a wooden table held a wash basin, pail of water, and dipper. While she was getting some of the trail dust from her face, Yadkin came back into the house.

His eyes hooded at the look on Frank's face.

"Get one thing straight, Yadkin. She *is* my wife. We were married this morning."

"That's fine, Frank."

Frank said, "I'm glad you believe me."

Yadkin laughed. "Well, I'll admit for a minute I thought it a cock-and-bull story. Most outlaws on the run ain't so lucky. They have to pick up the kind of skirts that'll trail along with them. She didn't look like the type."

Radek came in, picked up a bottle from the table, and made it gurgle in a long drink. Fire splashed his insides, leaped into his eyes. "You must be quite a boy, Donovan. A looker like that won't usually pick up with our kind unless his jeans are heavy with dinero from a bank or rustling job."

"Easy, Radek," Yadkin said. "She's—"

"A purty bundle," Radek finished.

Frank stood up, walked over to him. Radek was nerveless—or brave from drink—as he watched Frank. Radek laughed. "Don't put on a tough act, Donovan. We've seen plenty of tough ones come and go, Yadkin and me. You're young. With care, you might live another ten, twelve years before some sheriff catches up with you."

"I'm not trying to act tough," Frank said. He could feel a cold trembling flowing down into his hands. "I just wanted to ask you—what kind is our kind?"

"You've got the stink of outlaw, escaped con on you. What in hell—"

"The girl is my wife," Donovan said.

Radek pursed his lips. "I see."

Frank felt a hand on his arm. Yadkin turned him. "Sit down, Frank. And you, Radek, watch your tongue."

"He's on the run himself," Yadkin said, "Radek is. Been holed in here without the sight of a woman until he's talking about them in his sleep. Apologize, Radek."

"Sure," Radek said in a flat voice.

"We can't afford conflict," Yadkin cautioned. "Radek, you won't live long. You still haven't learned that men on the owlhoot stick together or hang separately. Learn it quick, Frank. Learn it well. And never side a man who won't stick."

Yadkin rubbed his hands together. "Now, I can tell you something to brighten your spirits, Frank. We've got the damnedest Mexican deal set up you've ever seen."

"What kind of deal?"

"Wet cattle," Radek said.

Frank looked at Yadkin. "I thought you were going straight when you got out."

"Prison talk," Yadkin laughed. "Every little thing counts toward parole."

"I hadn't figured on this kind of thing," Frank said.

"I know," Yadkin said calmly. "Fancy pictures you've painted. A job. A home. A normal life. Why don't you just ask for the moon? You've got a long arm stretching

• • •

TOP SECRET

There was a young cowpoke from Boulder,
Who gave a dudeen the cold shoulder—
He looked with a frown,
At her new strapless gown,
And I cannot repeat what he told her!

—Pecos Pete

• • •

after you. It'll never relax, never let go. Be sensible and take this chance."

"I think I'd rather try it my way, Yadkin."

"It won't do you any good," Yadkin shrugged. "So you get a job. The guy learns sometime you're a wanted man. You'll be lucky to get off his place with a whole skin. Then another job, with something going sour inside you. The same thing happening over and over again. Then penny ante stuff, because you've thrown away the chance of teaming with a man like me."

FRANK TURNED. Glory was standing in the doorway, trail dust still smudged on her cheeks. "I didn't find a towel on the back porch," she said. "I came to ask—"

Looking at her, Frank knew she had heard everything. Radek's remarks had put a crawling shame in her eyes which even love for her husband could not curtain.

"Thanks, Yadkin," Frank said, "but I think we'll be riding. We can at least try it our way."

He moved over to Glory's side, took her small, cold hand.

Radek stood up, bottle in hand. Yadkin's face was suddenly sleepy no longer, but the hanging, deadly face of a mad bulldog.

"I've confided in you," Yadkin said, "believing you were here to stick."

Frank read stark messages in their eyes. Yadkin was thinking of how much Frank knew. Yadkin was dangerous. But Radek was more than dangerous. Radek's eyes made ice of Frank's marrow as he saw the way Radek was looking at Glory.

His hand moved like a spring uncoiling, slapping his gun free of leather.

Yadkin and Radek recognized death when it showed its features plainly. They stood unmoving, and Frank and Glory mounted, spurring a final effort from their mounts. . . .

In predawn silence the woman, rolled in her blanket, cried softly in her sleep. The sound woke the man beside her, and he lay with cold shadows over his face, listening and thinking. As the first streaks of dawn showed in the east, Donovan crawled from his blanket, built a fire, and started coffee.

There was a constriction in his throat as they ate, because they were strangers. Man and wife; yet an indefinable something had slipped away, like a tongue of flame leaving a piece of wood an old, dead ember.

Donovan saddled the horses while she cleaned up the camp site. He spanned her slim waist with his hands as he helped her into the saddle, and she gave him a wan, forced smile.

Sitting his saddle, he glanced at her. "Yadkin was right about one thing. Mexico isn't the safe answer. I think I know the way out."

Without question she followed him. He rode hard and fast, and he rode in a straight line, and when the sun was sinking in the afternoon, he had ridden in one day the distance it had taken two days and better to traverse afoot.

He stopped his mount atop a knoll.

"That's the prison farm down there," he said.

"I know, Frank."

He studied her. He saw tears like jewels on her lids. And he saw the light coming back into her sweet, dusty face and he felt the old bond stirring to life between them.

As if obeying an unseen voice, they both dismounted, met between the horses, and their bodies came together in a hungry embrace.

He kissed her, knowing the memory of it would have to last him for two long years.

"Frank . . . I'll be at the house. Our house. What do you want for supper the night you get home?"

"The night I get home," he said. "I think I'd like some fried chicken that night."

Then he turned and walked toward the prison farm. He heard a man shout as he was seen. Two guards came running toward him, guns in their hands. Shoulders square, he met them. One guard said with a glower, "Brother, we're going to cool you off with a week in solitary—bread and water!"

Donovan threw back his head and laughed. He had a much more important meal to look forward to. ● ● ●

Kenny couldn't believe his eyes

KENNY'S MA WAS just a little too independent, Kenny thought. She kept insisting she didn't want, or need . . .

A MAN ON THE PLACE

KENNY PEARSON watched morosely from the top rail of the horse corral as the tall man in front of the house swung lightly to the back of his big roan horse. Words drifted faintly to the boy, "—if you're sure there's nothing needs doing—" and his mother's crisp reply, "Can't think of a thing today, Carl, thanks."

Kenny kicked his boot heels against the log beneath him and muttered to himself. Mom was a wonderful woman, but sometimes he couldn't understand her at all. Why couldn't she be a little nicer to Carl, who was their nearest neighbor and his best friend? Dad had died three years ago, when Kenny was six, and although for a while the thought of his being supplanted by any other man had brought agony to the boy, time had worked its changes and now he viewed things from a more practical angle.

Thalia Pearson was still young, barely

By F. G. Stalcup

thirty, and she needed a man to take care of her. Kenny knew with some deep, instinctive wisdom that all his own devotion to her was not enough to give her the life she needed to make her completely happy. But she was so all-fired choosey! Her slim, auburn-haired loveliness had brought several fellows courting in the last couple of years, but for one reason or another she had sent them all on their way with the same answer—no.

The muffled staccato of hoofbeats brought Kenny's head up, and Carl pulled in beside him, his teeth flashing white in a lean, sun-bronzed face. "Why don't you ride over tomorrow, partner, and see Susie's new colt?" he suggested sociably.

Kenny brightened instantly, and replied, "Sure thing, Carl! I'll be over right after breakfast."

Sunset was spreading its rosy-golden glow over the valley that evening and Kenny was washing up for supper when Dandy, his collie, set up a racket in the yard. Thalia, her cheeks pink from the stove's heat, hurried to the door. Kenny heard her cry, "Why, Yancey, what a pleasant surprise! Come right in! You're just in time for supper. Kenny, take Yancey's team down to the barn for him, will you, dear?"

Kenny tossed the towel in the general direction of the rack and stalked out to do her bidding, grunting a stiff reply to the greeting of the man on the porch. That slick dude, Yancey Field! Kenny didn't like him and never had.

Field was his mother's lawyer, and had handled all her legal work since Dad had been killed by a wild bronc he was breaking. Field had been after Thalia ever since then to sell the small ranch and move to town where she could get a job and support herself and her son with much less effort than she put forth on the ranch—so he said. Kenny knew perfectly well that the man was saying one thing and thinking quite another—he could tell by the proprietary gleam in his eyes whenever they rested upon Thalia. Yancey just wanted her in town so he could court her easier.

His mother's marriage to Field would kill all Kenny's dreams. The ranch was in his blood, and to sell it and leave it in the hands of strangers would be to betray the memory of his father, who had been everything Kenny hoped to be when he grew up. Town, to the boy, was simply another name for prison. He'd have to sell Chica, his mare, and where could they keep Dandy, who had been his constant companion since babyhood?

What would Kenny find to do with himself, how occupy his time in the cramped confines of town? And school! He could imagine how all the strange kids would laugh at his countrified ways.

Yancey stayed far past Kenny's bedtime that evening, and as the boy lay sleepless, listening to the murmur of voices from the living room, he shivered with fear of what Thalia and the lawyer were discussing. And the following morning at breakfast Thalia was so quiet and preoccupied that he was more scared than ever.

TRUE TO HIS PROMISE to Carl, he went straight to the corral after breakfast and saddled Chica. The little blaze-faced sorrel mare nuzzled him affectionately as he worked, and contrary to his usual habit, for he was passionately fond of her, he scowled and pushed her soft, questing muzzle away.

"Why won't Mom listen to me?" he demanded of Dandy, who sat nearby, his slanting, amber eyes fixed anxiously upon Kenny. "I've got the answer to the whole business, and his name is Carl Carpenter!"

Carl owned the Rafter C ranch, which adjoined theirs on the south. Carl and Kenny's father had been good friends, giving each other a neighborly hand with the work on the two ranches whenever the need arose.

Since Kenny's father's death, though, a constraint had fallen between his mother and Carl, although scarcely a day went by that Carl didn't drop over to see if anything needed doing that old Jake Bidwell, the Pearson's only hired hand, couldn't take care of.

What did Thalia find wrong with Carl? In Kenny's opinion, Carl was just one step

down the ladder of perfection from Kenny's own father. He was one of the best liked men in Antelope Valley, and was good-looking enough in a kind of rough-hewn way to catch any woman's eye. That he had never married was a matter of some speculation in the community. A hard, steady worker, he had built up his little cow ranch into a comfortably going concern, and it would be the simplest thing in the world to throw the two spreads together.

Kenny yanked the latigo snug and unhooked the stirrup from the horn. Into his mind popped his mother's sharp retort the time he had mentioned Carl to her as a possible successor to Dad. "I refuse to be an object of pity!" she had snapped. "I'll marry no man simply because he thinks I need him on the place." Man, how dumb could she be? Every time Carl looked at her, Kenny was reminded of a hungry calf restrained from a bucket of milk. Pity, huh!

He mounted Chica with the aid of a salt block and rode by the house to yell, "Going over to Carl's, Mom!" through the open kitchen window. Catching her acknowledging wave, he galloped over the hill to the south, Dandy bounding along at Chica's heels.

When they clattered into the Rafter C yard a short while later, Kenny stared about him in alarm. Something was wrong! Cattle were bellowing mournfully at the empty watering trough. Carl's big roan nickered wistfully from the corral. Chickens rushed to surround the newcomers, obviously hungry and expecting grain. Kenny flung himself to the ground, and sprinted toward the snug little log house. He shouted as he ran, "Carl! Carl, where are you?"

He burst through the door without ceremony and stopped in horror, gazing through into the connecting room at the man who lay on the bed, jackknifed in pain. Wasting not a moment to ask questions that Carl was plainly too sick to answer, he dashed back to the yard and scrambled into the saddle.

Chica had never traveled as fast in her life as she did going back home that bright summer morning. Her flying hoofs shot gravel in all directions as Kenny hauled her to a halt in the home yard and jumped from her back with a leap.

"Mom, Mom!" he screamed, his voice cracking with terror. "Call the doctor, Carl's dying!"

Thalia flew to meet him, blanched to the lips.

"What do you mean, dying? Did a horse—"

"No, no, he's sick on the bed in the house. Call the doctor quick, please, Mom!"

Thalia whirled to the phone and spun the crank furiously. As soon as the call was completed she ran to the corral and slapped the saddle on her little black horse. Motioning Kenny to follow, she swung up, heedless of her hampering skirts, and lit out cross-country to the Rafter C with the dust boiling behind her.

Hours later, Thalia sat beside Carl's bed, smiling tenderly into his drawn, still pallid face.

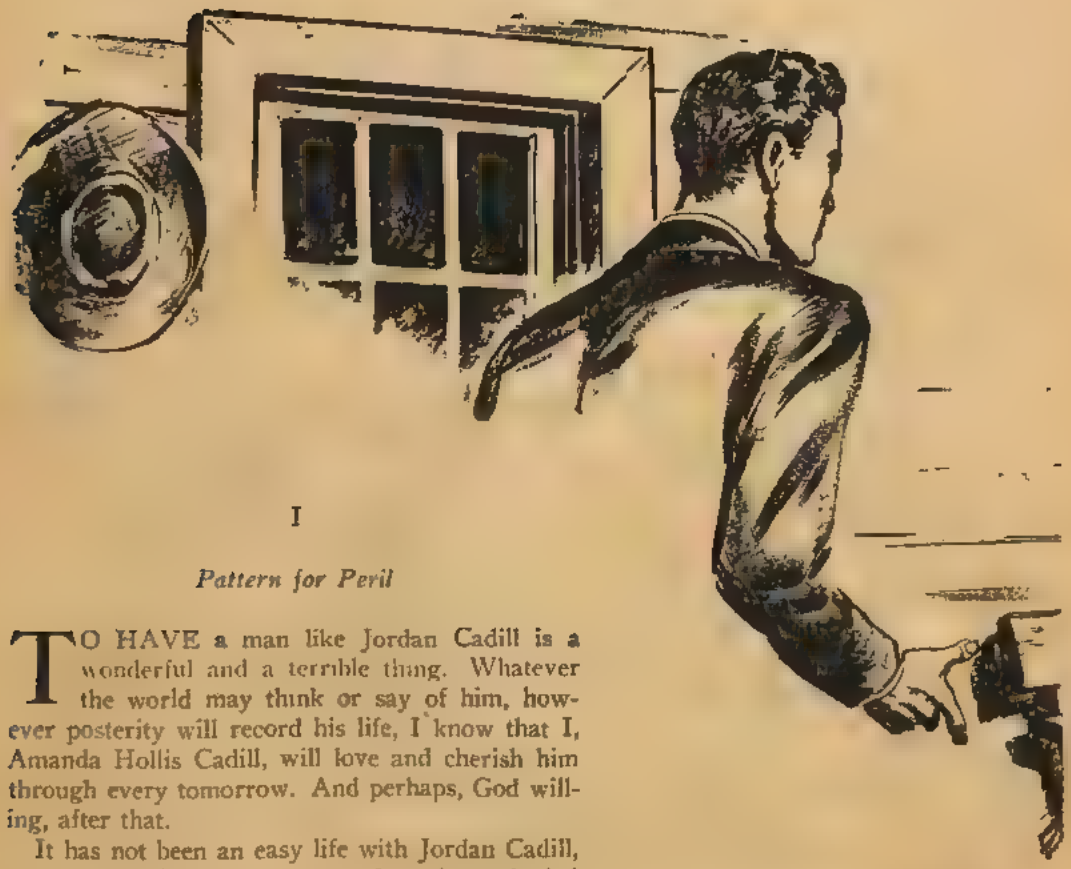
"Ptomaine!" she said. "I'm not surprised. The only wonder to me is that you haven't killed yourself long ago with the things you eat. I never saw a man in my life who could feed himself decently. You all seem to think you have the digestive ability of a goat."

Carl's answering grin was wobbly, but his gray eyes glowed. Stretching out a lean hand to take one of hers he said, "You know, you've made a monkey outa me. For years I've been wanting to take care of you, and now you prove that it's me needs the looking after more than you ever did. How about it, Thalia—will you please take on the job?"

Kenny had escorted the homeward-bound doctor to his buggy, and upon his return to the house shock stopped him dead in the doorway for the second time that day as he looked into Carl's bedroom. His mom and Carl—kissing!

But then Kenny shrugged philosophically and grinned to himself. He guessed he could get used to a little of that silly romancing around the house. ● ● ●

UNTIL TOMORROW



I

Pattern for Peril

TO HAVE a man like Jordan Cadill is a wonderful and a terrible thing. Whatever the world may think or say of him, however posterity will record his life, I know that I, Amanda Hollis Cadill, will love and cherish him through every tomorrow. And perhaps, God willing, after that.

It has not been an easy life with Jordan Cadill, for even our happiest moments have been shaded by fear and danger. We have never known security and ease of mind. Jord was still a boy in his teens when he first had to lift a gun against a man, and since that time he has lived always with

Driven by fear and guilt, my man and I fled down the bloodstained trail that led to a desperate destiny

COMES *a novelet by* ROE RICHMOND

"He's a gunfighter, Teal," I warned. "Don't be a fool!"

a gun at hand. Once it started, there was no stopping, and to hang up his gun would be to invite death.

I knew what it would be like when I married him, and I have no complaint to make here, although in secret I have wept and prayed, railed and ranted against it. Jord was eighteen when that first man went down with his bullet, and from that day on they wouldn't let him alone. Relatives and friends of the dead man came after him, and to stay alive Jordan Cadill had to fight them, kill or be killed. Because he was swift and sure with a gun, he lived, and his reputation grew, until everywhere he went there were men who challenged him, who could not rest until they called him and tried to match his draw —and fell dead or wounded under his fire.

So he lived always on the run, always hand in hand with death, and even after we were married and he tried so hard to get away from it, there was no escaping that grim pattern. The only way out would have been to move East, but Jordan said living there would kill him quicker than any bullet.

At this moment I am waiting for him, not knowing where nor how he is, alive or dead, well or hurt, but holding faith that somehow, somewhere, he is still breathing and will come back to me—in spite of those men who are waiting to kill him: Loren Houdry and Koby, Jaffray and Red Sotterly.

I'm waiting in a small frame house at the edge of town, the two children in bed and sleeping, while I sit in the high-backed old rocker, rocking in the lamplight, the chair creaking gently, the minutes ticking by in loneliness, that familiar hollow ache inside me. I wait and I think of Jord, and live it all over again in my mind.

LOREN HOUDRY was courting me, and I was the envy of all the young girls in the region, when Jordan Cadill first came to the Cordovan. The Houdrys' Andiron H was the largest and richest spread in the valley, and Loren was big and blond and handsome, an arrogant and powerful young man, vitally attractive, and with a great deal of charm. As the elder son, Loren was heir to the ranch, and I was counted fortunate indeed to be favored as his prospective bride.

I was quite proud and happy—or thought so—anticipating a luxurious life as mistress of Andiron, with gowns and jewels and perfumes from New York, or even Paris, and trips to St. Louis and Chicago, Philadelphia and New York, and possibly to Europe. Although I sometimes resented Loren Houdry's lordly assurance and regal bearing, it wasn't difficult to fancy myself in love with him. For Loren was entertaining company, despite his self-centeredness; clever in conversation, an excellent dancer, gay and romantic with a strong physical appeal. And so good-looking that women raved about him, from the Paladin Peaks to the Yoder Desert.

Loren Houdry was no pampered idler either, but a real top-hand among his father's men, riding and roping and shooting with the best of them, known as a terrific fighter with bare hands or guns. Teal, the younger brother, while smaller and less handsome than Loren, was much the same in action, with a rashness and impetuous fury all his own. The Houdry brothers were respected and feared along the Cordovan River, for themselves as well as for the wealth and power behind them.

After the fall roundups, there was a big dance each year in the Plaza Hotel at Cordovan City. This autumn Loren Houdry had to trail-drive an Andiron herd to the railhead, and being unable to attend the dance he delegated brother Teal to escort me

In the excitement of dressing for the occasion, I soon forgot my disappointment over Loren's absence. The way Teal worshipped me was always flattering, and I knew I would enjoy myself and never lack for partners. I wore a new gown of dark green, tight in the bodice, flaring full to the floor, and the chestnut hair piled high on my head was lustrous with red-gold high-lights. My gray eyes took on a green tinge from the dress, my cheeks were flushed rosily, and the mirror told me I had never looked better. In my youthful conceit, I pitied Loren Houdry for what he was missing, out on the trail with those cattle.

The evening was well along when I felt someone's eyes on me with unusual intensity.

Accustomed as I was becoming this night to masculine looks of admiration and interest, I felt one particular stare as if the sun's rays were focussed on me through a magnifying glass. Waltzing with Teal Houdry, I searched the crowd until I found the man who was watching me. He was tall, as tall as Loren, I estimated, but not as broad and heavy. Rangy and slim in a neat dark suit, with somber black eyes burning in a lean face, not handsome but striking, somehow outstanding . . . His hair was dark, inclined to wave but cut close to the well shaped head. His nose was straight, strong like the sharply defined cheek- and jawbones, but this bleak strength was relieved by the wide pleasant curve of a boyish mouth.

When my eyes met his, a strange shock rippled through me and chills tingled along my spine. I knew at once that this man meant something to me, and I to him. Forgetful of Teal and the absent Loren, the music and everything else, I faltered like a novice in the rhythm of the dance, and Teal glanced at me with sudden surprise and concern.

"I'm sorry, Amanda. You're getting tired?"

"No, it was my fault, Teal. But I'm not tired."

"What is the matter? You've seen a ghost, Amanda?"

"Something like that, I guess," I said, laughing with an attempt at lightness. "No, Teal, I was just dreaming."

"You have unpleasant dreams then, for such a lovely girl," Teal Houdry said.

"Not at all," I told him. "Startling perhaps, but not unpleasant."

"Do you want to stop dancing? I'm not up to my big brother Loren in the ballroom."

I shook my head, smiling fondly at him. "You dance very well, Teal. I wouldn't stop for anything. Can't you forgive a girl for missing a step?"

"It must be me," Teal muttered gloomily. "I ought to stick to horses and guns."

WHEN THE MUSIC ended, I saw the dark stranger coming toward us, easy and graceful, his eyes old and sad, his mouth young and sweet. My heart almost stopped beating, and my breath caught painfully in my throat. He came straight to us, and Teal Houdry began to bristle with anger. Bowing slightly before me, the stranger said:

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I have a feeling I know you."

"I don't know you, mister!" Teal said, hotheaded as ever. "Neither does the lady. You'd better breeze along."

The dark man said mildly: "I only wanted one dance. It's for the lady to say, I reckon."

My words came before I could check them. "You don't mind, do you, Teal?"

The blond boy stared at me in outraged amazement. "All right, Amanda, if that's what you want . . . Excuse me, please," Teal Houdry turned stiffly and stalked away, hurt and indignant.

"Amanda?" His voice was slow and soft. "I'm Jordan Cadill. I don't like to do things this way, but I haven't much time."

The name meant nothing to me at the moment, although later I realized I had heard it more than a few times. "Amanda Hollis," I said, taking his hand. "You're just passing through then?"

His smile was wry but gentle. "I'm always passing through places. You saw me watching you? I wasn't lying . . . The minute I saw you, it was as if I had always known you."

"Yes, I know," I said, continuing to speak without conscious volition, and surprising myself. "I felt it, too. A very strange thing." It was so deeply stirring that I forgot all about being coy and coquettish, speaking as simply and frankly as Jordan Cadill did. From the start, there was no pretense or subterfuge between us, and no need of any.

The music rose, in waltz time again, and I seemed to fit in his formal embrace to perfection. It was more like floating than dancing. I was aware of nothing but his nearness, the clamor in my breast and the rioting of my blood. I had read and heard about such miracles as this, never fully believing them; but now it seemed the most natural and inevitable happening in the world. It was meant to be, we were meant

for one another. We had met, at last, and that's all there was to it . . . Shamelessly I wanted to leave the floor, get away from the crowd, and be alone with Jordan Cadill. For the first time, dancing seemed a trivial waste of time to me.

"It's too bad I stopped in Cordovan," he said. "There's no room in my life—for this."

"Why do you say that?"

"There's a curse on me, Amanda Hollis. When you know who and what I am, you'll hate me. And yourself, for dancing with me."

"What are you?" I asked, not truly caring.

"A gunfighter," Jordan Cadill said. "Not from choice or profession, but still a gunman. It's a wonder to me my name hasn't reached here."

I remembered then; the name clicked a responsive chord in my mind. Jord Cadill was a name to evoke terror and dread throughout the West, but I was neither shocked or awed . . . He was just a lean dark man who set me deliciously aflame, as no other ever had done, a man with sad tired eyes and a fresh boyish mouth. "It doesn't matter—Jordan Cadill," I told him honestly, looking up into his face.

"Will you walk outside with me then?" he inquired.

"Yes," I said calmly. "Outside, anywhere—with you."

We left the floor with people staring curiously at us, but I scarcely noticed and cared not at all. In the long corridor, where hats and gunbelts were hung, Jordan Cadill took his black hat and belt from its peg. He was strapping on the belt in the lobby, when Teal Houdry overtook us, eyes flaring in fury as he buckled on his own gun.

"Where you going with him, Amanda?" he demanded.

"Outside for a breath of air, Teal," I said. "Please, now—there's nothing for you to get upset about."

"If you go, I go," said Teal. "Because you are promised to my brother, Amanda!"

Jordan Cadill turned gravely to me. "Is that so, Amanda?"

"It was," I admitted. "But not any more. . . ." I took Loren's ring off my finger without a single pang. "Here, Teal." I held it out to him.

TEAL HOUDRY struck viciously at my hand, and the ring spun in a brilliant arc, rolling on the floor. "Step outside and die, mister!" Teal said, eyes fixed glittering on the other man.

"Hasn't the lady a right to choose?" asked Jordan Cadill.

"Not this way, this sudden. She's out of her head, under some crazy spell. Move along, fellow."

"I'm Jordan Cadill."

Teal's eyes widened, but he only said: "It doesn't matter who the hell you are; you're a dead man. Get on out that door!"

"He's a gunfighter, Teal," I protested. "Don't be a fool."

"You're the fool!" Teal Houdry said bitterly. "I never saw the gunman I couldn't take—unless it's Loren. Outside, Cadill, or I'll burn you down right here!"

I moved toward the boy, but he pushed me roughly aside, and the two men went out together. I ran after them, wanting to scream for help but never gathering the breath for it. . . . The street was empty and deserted, as they descended the steps, crossed the plank walk, and backed off in opposite directions. I cried out something to Teal, and he told me to shut up and get back into the Plaza.

They halted about thirty feet apart, Teal slim and towheaded, without a hat, Jordan Cadill tall and dark and perfectly relaxed, still trying to talk the boy out of it. But Teal Houdry cursed him savagely and reached for his gun. I never saw Cadill's move, but his gun blazed red and loud as Teal's cleared the holster. Teal swayed backward, lurched forward, and his gun blasted dirt in front of his own boots as he toppled slowly and stretched full length, face in the gravel, head shimmering golden in the lamplight.

Jordan Cadill was talking to himself when I reached him on the run: "Tried for the shoulder, but he jumped when he drew. Got him in the chest . . . Too bad, Amanda."

It was more than that. It was a tragic shame, but in the selfishness of my new-found love I was only thankful that Jordan Cadill had been spared. Sorry for young Teal Houdry, of course, but glad it was him instead of Jordan lying in the street. Because Jord Cadill was no stranger to me, he was the man I'd been waiting for all my life, and with Loren Houdry it had been only marking time while I waited. I didn't know this before, but I knew it now, knew it well—and nothing else mattered.

"You'll have to run for it, Jordan," I told him breathlessly. "All of Andiron will be after you, the whole town of Cordovan."

"Used to that, Amanda," he said. "Tell me where you live. I'll be back—if you want me to." He kissed me, quick, clean and hard.

"That's all I want, Jord," and I told him where I lived with my aunt and uncle, my parents being dead . . .

Jordan Cadill was gone before the crowds poured into the street, and I was crouching there beside the body of Teal Houdry. As I expected, people more or less blamed me for the boy's death, and predicted dire punishments for me when Loren Houdry got back. I didn't mind what the town thought, but I was dreading Loren's return. Andiron riders scoured the countryside and beat the brush for many miles, but found no trace of Cadill, who had a way of vanishing as if by magic.

Fortunately, Jord Cadill came back for me before Loren Houdry got home. It was there for us, even deeper and stronger than the first time, and I ran away with him. We crossed the Cordovan and the Yoder Desert on horseback, following the old road that had linked Fort Shelley on the west with Camp Grant in the east. We were married in Stockade, and spent our honeymoon hidden out in the establishment of Otis Lockett, who had founded the settlement, the first white foothold in the vast Madrill Basin. If old Otis liked a man, it didn't matter which side of the law that man was on, and Otis was fond indeed of Jord Cadill. So we were well protected by the innumerable members of the Lockett clan.

IT WAS, in fact, the greatest peace and security we were to know through the years, even though Loren Houdry arrived one day with a posse of grim-faced gun-slung riders from Andiron H and Cordovan City. Old Otis Lockett turned them away without any trouble. Not even the Houdrys were big enough to question Lockett's word and attempt to search his elaborate layout. The grand old man of the Madrill was still a power in this land, as he had been in the earliest pioneer days, when Cochise called him friend and brother.

Otis told us that Loren Houdry had sworn to run us down, if it took the rest of his lifetime.

"He isn't the first one to take that oath," Jordan Cadill said.

"There are others, devoting their lives to chasing you?" I asked, with some horror.

"A few," said Jordan. "There's a wizened little whippet of a Pinkerton man named Koby. A stolid respectable citizen called Jaffray, a giant of a man. And a grinning strutting bandit named Red Sotterly."

"Well, I've lived in one place long enough anyway," I said bravely, foreseeing a life of running, hiding and fighting.

"That's the girl, Amanda" said Jord, smiling gravely. "We'll have our troubles here and there, but we won't have too much monotony, I reckon."

"Are there any friends, besides Otis?" I asked.

"Not many," he confessed. "Not many dare to befriend a gunman like me. But there is one by the name of Ruddock, solid as a rock."

I tossed my head defiantly. "We don't need anybody else, Jord."

He looked at me gravely. "I hope you're right, Amanda. I hope you won't ever regret this—too much."

"I knew what I was getting into," I said. "I'm satisfied, Jord."

Jordan Cadill took me into his arms, held me with gentle strength, and my own arms tightened about his lean-muscled waist, my face lifted to meet the pressure of his mouth on mine. It was like sweet racing fire all through me, shining wonder and rare exalta-

tion. It was worth any hardships that might have to be suffered—I thought, in my happy innocence. . . .

We rode eastward from Stockade, following in reverse the track of the old westbound wagon trains, Jordan on his great bay gelding, myself on a lively little chestnut mare that he said matched my hair in coloring. On the trail, he was considerate without ever seeming to be, watchful of my comfort and safety while treating me as an equal partner.

We were well mated in every way, I decided blissfully. We enjoyed talking together, saw humor in the same things, beauty in the same scenes, and shared similar interests, likes and dislikes. Jordan told me many fascinating legends of the Madrill country in Indian times, pointing out landmarks near and far. The Madrill Mountains towered along the northern skyline, the Shangree Hills rolling away to the south.

Now and then we met riders from outlying ranches and homesteads, and some of Jord's wary alertness communicated itself to me at these times. He had to regard every man as an enemy, at least potentially, and never relax his vigilance. At every hu-

"You take mighty good care of another man's wife!" Loren snapped

man contact, Jordan Cadill had to be ready to fight for his life.

It was a strange way to live, and a chilling premonition of horror touched me as I thought of the tension, building up unbearably through the years, straining nerves and sinews to the breaking point, making us gaunt and old before our time. Then I cast this aside as selfish and traitorous. It was enough just to be with him. To see that bright boyish smile lift some of the sorrow from his dark brooding eyes, when he looked at me. To have the warm comforting shelter of his arms around me at night.

We passed through Ox-Bow and went on, the red dirt road winding over undulating sunburnt prairies with herds of cattle grazing on distant grasslands. The afternoon sun blazed on our backs, and we followed our lengthening shadows into the east. Toward sundown, the sharp stone columns of The Needles showed ahead, and we turned in our saddles to watch the sunset flame over the faraway Paladin Peaks. The gray and lavender shadows of twilight deepened to purple and black, the stars swarmed out overhead, and it was full night when we entered the small settlement at The Needles.

After scouting the town Jord decided it was safe to stay there, and we stabled our horses behind the hotel, washed up in a room overlooking the street, and had supper in the dining room, warmed over and not too good. Before retiring we walked among the clustered rock spires north of the community, watching the moonlight wash the earth in radiant silver. Then, back in our room, we shut out the world and were alone once more in our private paradise

NOBODY recognized Jord Cadill, no one bothered us, and it was pleasant and secluded in The Needles. Travelers passed through the village in either direction, on horseback, in buckboards and wagons, or by stagecoach, but few stopped for any length of time, except when a stage made an overnight halt. Jord apparently had sufficient money, and I had brought some of my own, but I couldn't help wondering how long it would last, and how we would live when it was gone. I said nothing of this, however, not wishing to become a nagging wife at this early period.

We rode north to Apache Springs and the great Crown-B cattle ranch. We roved southeast another day and climbed the huge shattered bulk of Yellow Butte, seeing the vast herds of sheep at graze in the south. A man named Scott Haldane had brought the sheep here, Jordan told me, and Thorn Braxton, the Crown owner, had led the opposition against him in a bloody war, which culminated right here on the southerly slopes of Yellow Butte with Haldane the winner.

One evening after supper I was alone in the hotel room, hearing the horn and clatter of a late stagecoach coming in from the west.

A short time later, Jord Cadill entered the room and said we'd have to move out later in the night. One of the passengers in that Concord was Koby, the Pinkerton detective, and they were staying over. From the window, I had a vague look at the agent in the lamplight below, a sly weasel-like man with a thrusting head, cold peering eyes, and a narrow, frozen face.

"Reckon I'll have to kill him some time," Jord mused glumly. "He's been after me so long now, he seems almost like an old friend." He laughed and shook his cropped dark head. "Quite a bloodhound, that little Koby, and patient as an Indian. No matter where I go, Koby gets there sooner or later."

"And the others?" I said, feeling cold and nauseated in the pit of my stomach.

"They don't stick so close as Koby. They just kind of drift around with their eyes peeled, Jaffray and Red Sotterly, figuring they'll cross my track sometime or other."

"It'd be nice if they'd all get together," I said with some bitterness. "Loren Houdry with them, too."

"Why sure," agreed Jordan Cadill. "It'd be a lot easier to dodge one bunch than it is to keep clear of four different parties."

The room, that had become so cosy and homelike to us, was like a prison cell that evening . . . When the hotel and town were deep in slumber, Jord left money in the room and we crept out the back way like thieves in the night, saddling up and riding out as silently as possible.

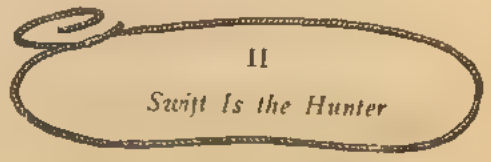
That was only the first of many such experiences, in scores of scattered settlements and towns. . . .

In Chimney Rocks, a couple of days later, we saw Koby pass through on the stagecoach, and thought we were safe there for a time. But that evening a shag-headed, crag-faced giant named Jaffray rode in, and we had to flee again in the darkness.

Camping out in the Madrill Foothills, we gave Koby and Jaffray time to get out of the country, and then we trekked down Pownall Creek to the large town that had grown up around Camp Grant. We were buying provisions here, when I caught a glimpse of Loren Houdry, big, blond, and grimmer looking than I had ever seen him. Once more we took off in hasty flight.

And so it went on, forever skulking and hiding and running away, and I came to feel as if I had been a hunted fugitive all my life.

But when Jord Cadill wanted to stand and fight, I refused to let him. Time, I sensed, was our only hope and salvation, time without any more strife and bloodshed, time and far places.



II

Swift Is the Hunter

WE LIVED in the saddle, slept in the open, and visited towns only to purchase supplies. Jord grew a black beard, and I became as copper-skinned as an Indian from the sun and wind. Leaving the Madrill Basin behind, we pushed into new country, keeping to the hills and woods, shunning the main roads and trails.

When we finally stopped in a settlement for Jordan to get barbered and both of us to get bathed and cleaned up, there was the swaggering flamboyant figure of Red Sotterly, flame-haired, pale-eyed and smiling, with a fighting-cock air and two guns strapped low on his thighs. So we fled again, without enjoying a full-course meal or a night in bed. And I knew Jord's money was running short, although he didn't mention it.

The next time we had to buy grub, I forced my money onto Jordan Cadill, and he finally accepted it with reluctance and ill grace.

"I'm going to get a job, Amanda," he said. "If they come, one at a time or all together, I'll stand and face them and have it out. We can't go on like this. We'll be starving soon."

At May's Ford, Jordan went to work breaking wild horses for a trader, while I fix up an abandoned shanty for us to live in, taking unexpected delight in housecleaning, cooking, and such wifely activities.

For the first time we lived a normal married life—but it lasted only a few weeks.

The town marshal became inquisitive, and finally tried to take my husband. Jord gun-whipped the man senseless, stood off his scared deputies, and we were on the run once more.

Jordan got a job on a ranch, and I was taken on as cook's helper and housekeeper, but after a month or so there, Jord spotted Koby riding a mule toward the spread and we left in a hurry.

And that's the way it went, two whole years of it, until I could no longer conceal the fact that I was going to have a baby.

"Amanda, Amanda," said Jord Cadill, and his dark eyes were shining wet. "I never realized that running away can get as monotonous as standing still. But we're all through running now, Amanda."

"What are we going to do, Jord?"

"We'll go to Harrodsburg, where Ruddock lives. He'll have work for me, and a place for us to live. He'll keep the local law off my neck, at least."

So we came to this plain little house, secured for us by Ruddock, on the outskirts of Harrodsburg, and Jord went to work as a gun-guard in Ruddock's Top Hat, a combined saloon and gambling house.

Ruddock was stocky and square, solid and dependable, with tousled sandy hair, clear gray eyes, and a warm friendly smile. Simply dressed, mild of manner, courteous and pleasant, he was a man of great latent power but not at all the kind you'd expect to find operating a place like the Top Hat. It was clear that Rud would do anything for Jordan Cadill; the friendship between them was real, true and deep, rare and lasting.

Little Koby arrived in Harrodsburg shortly before my baby was due, and Jord left town, on Ruddock's insistence but much against his own will. Jord was away when the baby came, and Ruddock attended to all the details, getting the doctor and a practical nurse, seeing that we got the best of care and attention. It was a boy, fine and healthy, the doctor said, and I would have been perfectly happy if Jord had been home.

In the days that followed, Ruddock spent a lot of time with me, and his kindness and consideration were heart-warming indeed. Koby had left town without discovering anything, apparently, although you never could be sure about that small ferret. As I recovered, I came to realize with shocking surety that Ruddock was in love with me, but so loyal and devoted to Jord that he wouldn't willfully have revealed his feeling. A woman can read those things.

I had nothing to fear from Rud, I was certain, but it troubled me nevertheless. I had grown exceedingly fond of Ruddock, but there was no possibility of my loving any other man than Jordan Cadill. It bothered me to think of Rud's being hurt, as he surely must be, but there was nothing I could do about it.

Engrossed as I was with my son, I began to fear that Jordan had fallen before some of his enemies as the days passed. Ruddock did his utmost to soothe and reassure me, and without his support I might have broken down. But Jord returned finally, unscathed and well, proud and happy with his first child, but bitter over the fact that he had been driven away when the boy was born—bitter beyond all natural bounds, it seemed to me.

But it soon wore off, or I thought it did, and we were grateful and contented together with our tiny son, whom we christened with my family name of Hollis. Hollis Cadill, a fine name for the finest baby ever, we agreed.

The only dark spots in this sunny time were the constant dread of the manhunters' coming, and the deep hurt that showed occasionally in Ruddock's gray eyes despite all his efforts to hide it. He considered it a signal honor to be Hollis' godfather, and we felt fortunate in having such a friend of the family.

THERE were more enforced separations in the next year, as one by one the pursuers drifted into Harrodsburg, and Jordan Cadill became more embittered with every flight from home. On my part, each absence became harder to bear, particularly since Jord seemed to be growing apart from

me, the breach widening between us every time he fled. Ruddock was a source of strength and comfort in these barren interludes, completely devoted to the baby and myself . . . But with his spending so much time at the house, it was inevitable that malicious tongues should begin to wag.

Red Sotterly came first, strutting the streets and saloons with his bright checkered shirts and bone-handled guns, drinking and boasting, with a chip always on his shoulder, making love to the girls in the dancehall. We went under the name of Miller here, but I was fearful that Sotterly would somehow find his way to my home. He didn't, but when Koby returned soon afterward, I caught the little detective spying on the house, tireless as a watchdog. Luckily he departed before Jordan came back, bleaker than ever.

Then big Jaffray blew in, massive, rock-jawed and quiet, saying little but hearing much, and he too came to study the house one day. Little by little, the hunters were linking John Miller, who was never at home, with the man they were seeking. The strain was fretting my nerves raw, wearing me down, and I knew it was simply a matter of time.

Panic really burst in me, when I learned that Loren Houdry was in Harrodsburg Ruddock came to tell me, saying that he had prevailed upon Jordan to run out again, but only after great difficulty. "Jord won't be running much longer, I reckon, and I don't know as I blame him, Amanda," he commented.

Two days later, Loren Houdry stood on the porch, knocking on my door. I stood frozen with horror inside, unable to move or speak. Loren had aged and hardened, there was no laughter left in him, and when nobody answered the door he put a great shoulder to it, snapping the bolt and forcing an entrance. Towering there in the small parlor, Loren Houdry looked down at me with hatred and contempt.

"Where is he, Amanda?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully.

"Don't lie to me!" Loren rasped, and I thought he was going to strike me with his open hand.

"I'm not lying, Loren" I said desperately. "I don't know where he is."

"But you're married to him—Mrs. Miller?"

I inclined my head silently. Loren gazed around the shabby room with scorn and loathing. "A wonderful life you chose," he said. "You could have been the mistress of Andiron, you fool! But I'm glad the rotten streak cropped out before I could marry you."

"Please go! Please leave me alone, Loren," I begged.

"Maybe I'll move in and wait for your husband," he taunted.

The baby started crying in the bedroom, and Loren Houdry laughed aloud in mockery, tossing his tawny head. "So, there's a brat too? Does he favor his gunfighting father, Amanda? Aren't you going to show me the little wolf whelp?"

"No, no, please go away," I pleaded, sobbing in spite of all I could do.

"You're married to a dead man, Amanda," said Loren Houdry. "I guess you realize that. It's common talk in town that you're Ruddock's woman, when Cadill's on the dodge. Why shouldn't I enjoy some of your favors, wench?"

He grasped me before I could stir, crushing me breathless in his mighty arms, holding me helpless, kissing me with brutal force, bearing down until my teeth cut into my lips and I tasted blood along with the terror and sickness. Little Hollis was still wailing, and I fought frantically to free myself, but there was no escaping his ruthless iron grip and his bruising mouth. I was on the verge of fainting, when the door slammed open and Ruddock stood there, jabbing a gunbarrel into Houdry's back. Loren released me, and I collapsed on the shoddy worn sofa, as he wheeled deliberately to face Ruddock's gun.

"Get out, mister," Ruddock said evenly. "Out of here and out of town."

LOREN HOUDRY looked past him to the porch, where two more men were standing with thumbs hooked into gunbelts.

"You've got me outnumbered some." He smiled insolently. "You take mighty good care of another man's wife, Ruddock!"

Ruddock slashed the gunbarrel into that proud face, leaving a long welted gash as Houdry's blond head jerked under the blow. "You'll die for that," Loren said tautly "You'll die along with Jord Cadill."

"Outside, before I kill you right here!" Ruddock said, his gray eyes shining like ice, his rough-hewn face harsh and merciless.

"I'll go; I haven't much choice," murmured Loren Houdry. "But I'll be back again. I'll be seeing you, Amanda."

Ruddock prodded him out the door. The men there took Loren's guns, and the three of them marched him down the street to escort him out of Harrodsburg. But Loren Houdry would return, there was no doubt of that. Sick and sobbing, I went to the bedroom to tend to the little boy, wishing in my despair that he had never been born into such a murderous world—wishing that I had never been born either.

That evening after the baby was asleep, I did break down, filled with a black desolation that I could no longer contain Ruddock was there, grave, gentle and sympathetic, taking me tenderly into his arms, as the great sobs racked my body and the blinding tears flooded my face. And that's the way we were, Rud doing his best to ease my torture, when the back door opened and Jordan Cadill came in and stood staring at us.

"I've been hearing things," Jord said quietly. "Wouldn't believe them until now. It looks like they're true all right. It looks like our ways split here, Rud."

"You've got it wrong, Jord," protested Ruddock.

"I don't think so. I suppose it was bound to happen. You'd better go, Rud "

"Jord, Jord!" I cried in a frenzy. "Rud was just trying to help me. He drove Loren Houdry out of town today. You've got to understand, Jord."

Jordan didn't seem to hear me. "Get out, Rud," he said. "I don't want to throw a gun at you."

"You're wrong, Jord, awful wrong," said Ruddock. "Amanda was crying, and I tried to comfort her. I wouldn't cross you, Jord, for anything in the world. Don't you know that?"

"I did—once. But a woman can change everything. Go now, Rud, and don't come back. I'd hate to have to kill you."

Ruddock left, and I flung myself at Jordan, trying to shake some sense into him, but he stood like a statue, cold, aloof, impervious. I couldn't reach him at all.

Here's Luck

HANG A horseshoe heels down and your luck will drain away. Toes up, and you're safe. Nail one up to ward away evil spirits and plagues—and the devil himself—or so the superstitious have said for centuries. Anyway, from ancient times until now, the horseshoe has been a bit more than a protection for a horse's hoof; it has been a magic symbol with countless meanings.

It is said that the devil was trapped once by a horseshoe. A legend says that Saint Dunstan once shod Satan's cloven hoof; and recognizing him, kept him chained until he begged for mercy. From that day to this, the devil is supposed never to enter any dwelling protected by a horseshoe nailed over the door—heels up.

So hang the shoe carefully, and don't say, "I'll be damned if I do!" For you might be—if you don't. ——*Tex Mumford*

Turning wearily from me, Jord went in to look at the sleeping child, and I fell weakly and hopelessly into the nearest chair, feeling as if the world were coming to an end, crashing all about me in jagged screaming pieces. I was still there when Jordan came back, after a timeless void, noticing with dull surprise that he had shaved, washed up, and changed his clothes.

"Where are you going?" I cried, rising and clutching at his arms.

"I can't stay here, Amanda."

"But you just got home, Jord! Don't leave us again!"

"Some of the others are coming."

"Stay! Stay and fight them, Jord," I said. "You'll have to sometime. It might as well be now."

He looked dimly surprised, but only said: "I'll be back, Amanda. I'll fight them when the time is right."

"Don't leave, thinking what you do about Rud and me," I implored him.

"How can I think any different?"

My fingers bit into his arms. "It's wrong, wrong, *wrong!* Rud's the best friend any man could have, Jord."

"He was—once."

"He still is, Jord," I said. "You aren't being fair to him. Or to me."

Jordan broke my hold on him gently. "Well, we'll see, Amanda. I've got to be riding now. Take care of the boy, and I'll come back—when I can."

"Aren't you even going to kiss me, Jord?" I asked

He bent quickly, kissed me on the forehead, and went outside into the night again. I felt more alone than ever before.

III

Gun Bait

THE WEEKS stretched into months then, and Jord Cadill did not return. It occurred to me that he wasn't coming back this time, had never intended to, and I tried to give up looking and hoping for him. Of course, I couldn't do it. I was expecting another child, and I needed Jordan more than ever. I don't know how I would have endured this lonely ordeal, if it hadn't been for Ruddock.

Hollis had a baby sister whom I named Lucy after Jord's dead mother. I was still in bed when Ruddock brought word that Jordan was coming home. I saw it as a ruse to cheer me up, but Rud insisted he had been given the message by a rider he knew and trusted. I was finally convinced and heartened.

And still Jordan failed to appear, leaving me to sink back into that dark slough of despondency. Nobody could have been kinder and more thoughtful than Ruddock, but he wasn't the man I loved and needed.

Then the manhunters began to arrive once more, and on this occasion they stayed around until all four of them were lurking in the vicinity of Harrodsburg. Loren Houdry, little Koby, big Jaffray, and Red Sotterly—four men who for one reason or another had vowed to kill Jordan Cadill.

Ruddock posted guards at my house day and night, so I was not molested, but the knowledge of the four men's presence was enough to haunt and torment me almost out of my mind. If I hadn't been so busy with the children, it certainly would have driven me to distraction. The babies gave me something to live for, Ruddock offered us protection, and stubborn, hopeful love kept me going from day to dreary day, agonized by tension and fear but refusing to give up entirely.

Occupied as I was with the children, I still had to much time to think, particularly at night when they were asleep and Ruddock had departed. Dreading sleep because of the nightmares that came with it, I lay awake for endless hours, thinking of many things. How different my life would have been if I had married Loren Houdry, if I had simply refused to dance with Jordan Cadill that night in the Plaza Hotel. Or far better, if Jord hadn't been forced into becoming a gunfighter, and we had met and married in normal circumstances.

But I always wound up with the same

simple and conclusive thought: I wouldn't have it any different; I'd do the same thing over again. Jord Cadill is the only man in the world for me. Everything else is irrelevant—just Jordan and I, with our lovely son and daughter.

I had a feeling Jord was on his way home now, and he couldn't have come at a worse time. Once, in ironical jest, I had said it was too bad his enemies couldn't get together, and now the four of them were there waiting for him. As good as he was with guns, Jord Cadill wouldn't have had a chance against those four. It looked as if our ill-fated match might be coming to its inevitable violent finish.

I AWOKE with a start, early one morning, stricken with a premonition of disaster, chilled with dread. Hollis and Lucy were slumbering peacefully, I noted with relief, but something was wrong somewhere. Rising quickly, I pulled a robe on over my nightdress and went to the windows. The town was still shrouded in gray mist, and Ruddock's sentries were not in sight. I went from room to room, peering from the windows, but the guards were gone.

Coming to the kitchen last, I looked out into the back yard and saw a huge form lumbering from the shed toward the house. Then my relief gave way to panic, for it wasn't one of Rud's men. It was Jaffray, a giant in the foggy gloom, his heavy features set grim and cold as granite. As I watched, rooted in my tracks with terror, another figure emerged from the shed behind Jaffray. My heart almost exploded in my breast as I recognized Jordan Cadill, long and lean to gauntness, hollowed eyes burning darkly in his beard-stubbled face, clothing filthy and tattered from the trail.

Breathless, my throat aching and taut, I watched Jord stalk the giant across the mist-wreathed yard, until Jaffray sensed something at his back and wheeled around, reaching for his holster. But Jord was on top of him before he could draw, steel flashing as Jord struck with his gunbarrel, a wicked blow on the head bringing the big man to his knees

Jaffray swayed there, hat off and head drooping, blood running into his eyes, and Jordan's voice sounded clearly through the open window: "Unbuckle your belt, Jaff, and sling it away. Don't try anything or I'll drill you!" The stunned giant did as he was told, wagging his broken head, casting his belt and guns aside in the sparse bleached grass.

"You can live on one condition," Jord went on. "I hope you'll take it, Jaff, because I never wanted to kill you. Get off my track, and stay off it. Give me your word and I'll let you go. Otherwise you'll have to die here."

"I wanted you bad, Jord, a long long time," Jaffray said slowly. "Kansas was my partner, and you killed him."

"He forced the fight on me. I had to take him or die myself."

"Maybe," mumbled Jaffray, touching his gashed scalp gingerly. "Anyway, I don't want you bad enough to die here without a chance. But you ain't got a chance either, Jord, even if I pull out. There's three more men gunning for you."

"I know that," Jordan said. "That's why I want to settle with you, Jaff. Give me your word, or take the bullet. I haven't got any time to spare."

"You'll take my word?" Jaffray asked wonderingly.

"I'll take it," Jord Cadill said simply. "I know you, Jaffray, and the kind of man you are."

The giant sighed and shook his shaggy bleeding head. "All right, Jord. I'll pull out—and stay out. Getting old for this business, anyhow." He reached for his hat on the dewy grass, put it on, and got up slowly, looking at his gunbelt.

"I'll send it down to the Top Hat," Jord told him.

"Much obliged, Jord," said Jaffray, a smile splitting his face. "I'd wish you luck, but there ain't enough luck in the world to save you. So long, boy." Jaffray turned and walked around the front of the house into the road toward town, a huge shambling grizzly of a man with head bowed, never once looking back.

Jordan watched him go, still holding the big Colt, and I was about to call him, when another voice issued from shed corner and little Koby stepped into view, a gun trained on Jord's back. "Drop it before you turn, Cadill. Dead or alive the reward is good, so I'd just as soon shoot you as not." Sleek as a weasel, sly, shrewd and viperous, the Pinkerton agent stood there, his wizened face without emotion, his eyes cold.

JORD'S lips moved as he swore silently and let his gun drop, turning to face the detective, shoulders sagging in weary disgust. "So the reward's all you wanted, Koby?"

"Not exactly. I enjoy the game as well as the stakes. Stand where you are, Cadill, and I'll put the cuffs on you." Koby advanced, smiling but wary. "I'm really saving your life—for the time being, at least. The other two would shoot you on sight, Cadill."

"Why don't you?"

"Haven't got the heart," Koby said. "Trailed you so long I got kinda fond of you, Cadill."

Inside the kitchen, frozen at the window, I started with still another shock, as the broad form of Ruddock appeared at the corner of the rear porch, six-shooter lined on the Pinkerton agent. "Your turn to drop a gun," Ruddock said. It was like watching some fantastic play unreeled before my staring eyes, and a sense of unreality persisted.

But the blast of Ruddock's Colt was real enough, as Koby swiveled to fire at Rud. The .44 slug smashed the little man backward, his weapon flaring into the misty air as he went over, to squirm briefly and subside into stillness on the ground.

Jord Cadill was eying Ruddock with awe and wonder, when another gun roared from the corral beyond the shed, as Loren Houdry slid into view there. Horrified, I saw Ruddock shudder from the impact of lead, sink heavily to his knees, and pitch forward onto his face. Loren was switching his aim to Jord, firing as Jord dropped and lunged along the turf, grasping his gun up as he slid on his stomach, flame streaking from the barrel before his headlong momentum ceased.

And Loren Houdry was hit, hit before he could trigger again, his splendid body reeling and crumpling, his blond head shining as his hat fell off, his gunhand dropping and his legs spraddled out. But he stayed upright, dying on his feet but still walking toward Jordan Cadill, his handsome face distorted. Walking jerkily, staggering from side to side, trying to raise the gun again.

Jordan was on his feet now, holding his fire and watching Houdry in that grotesque twitching walk, until Loren's gun was finally coming level. Jord let go another shot then, the thunder of it ringing in my deafened ears, and Loren Houdry leaned on the little cottonwood, fell away from it and sprawled full length with outflung limbs, face buried in the dirt.

I was outside by that time, shamefully disregarding poor Ruddock and waiting for Jord, but he passed me by and went straight to Rud's huddled body—and I was glad and proud that he did, after my first sharp hurt faded. Ruddock was alive, wounded in the side and unconscious but still breathing, and I helped Jord get him inside the house.

The children were awake and crying, and I went to them while Jord cut away Rud's clothing to examine the bullet hole. He was bathing it when I returned, sterilizing it with whisky, remarking that it wasn't too bad and Rud should be all right, but he needed a doctor. I said I'd go, but Jord told me to stay with the kids and Rud.

"There's only one left," he murmured. "I might as well see him and get it done with. But first I want to see my daughter, Amanda."

When I saw Jord bending over the rosy faces of the children, I knew that everything was going to be all right with us again—except for the dodging and hiding—unless Red Sottery got in a lucky shot.

WE MADE Ruddock as comfortable as possible on the leather couch, and I watched Jord walk out the front door and start for town. As he left the front veranda, Red Sotterly stepped out from behind the

next house and came swaggering to meet him. I went cold and sick all over again. That red-headed killer was as insolently sure of himself as Satan. They stopped about forty feet apart, their elbows out and their hands spread-fingered.

"It sure took a long time, Jord," said the bandit. "I always hankered to see how fast you really was."

"Reach and find out, then," Jordan Cadill told him.

They moved together, Red's whole body leaping in a two-headed draw, but with Jord it was just a flicker of the right hand and wrist. The bright roaring blaze was from Jord's gun, and dust puffed out from the right shoulder of Sotterly's gay plaid shirt. He spun halfway around, his left-hand gun flaming wildly as the right-hand one clattered to the slat sidewalk. Sotterly landed on his side, flopped over onto his belly, and lay writhing slowly in agony, on the boards.

Jordan moved to him, took the guns, and straightened up to wait for the men who were rushing out the street now. Then I lost him in the milling mob, and knew stark fear once more—until Jord came walking back toward the house, between the doctor and a dark-suited man wearing the gold badge of a U.S. Marshal. My heart sank again, as I realized that Jord was caught after all, with either prison or a death sentence ahead of him.

"It's all right, Amanda," said Jord, leading the doctor in to Ruddock, while the marshal paused beside me with a pleasant smile

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Cadill," he said kindly.

"Jord couldn't help it!" I blurted out "They wouldn't let him alone. We've been running, hiding, doing everything we could to keep away from them, for over three years."

"I know, I know, Mrs. Cadill. I've investigated this case very thoroughly. Every time Jordan Cadill used a gun it was in self-defense. I knew these men were hounding him, and I came here to stop them. Not even Kohv had a right to, for he's no longer with Pinkerton. I got here too late, but fortunately it didn't turn out too bad. Kohv and Houdry are dead, I understand. Ruddock and Sotterly are wounded, but not dangerously. And the worst of it is all over now."

"You mean, you're going to give Jord a chance?" I gasped.

"I'm sure he deserves one," said the marshal. "And so do you, Mrs. Cadill. You and the children."

"Oh, thank God!" I breathed, weak and giddy with relief. "And thank you, thank you, Marshal."

"Another thing, there's a reward out for Sotterly," he said, with evident pleasure. "Not too large a one, but it'll help you start a new life, I reckon."

It was too much for me. I burst out crying, and the marshal had to guide me into the house. Once inside, Jordan Cadill took me in his arms and kissed me, my wet eyes and starved lips, and then everything was really all right.

"Rud's going to get well," Jord whispered. "I'm sure glad, because I've got a lot to make up to him, Amanda, for everything."

"He won't expect anything, Jord," I said. "All Rud wants is to be godfather to our kids—and a friend to us."

"Then he's got all he wants," Jord said, kissing me again.

I knew this wasn't quite true, but perhaps Rud had the next best thing to all that he wanted. And we surely had the finest friend in the world in Ruddock.

Then Rud spoke from the couch, surprisingly and slowly: "Sure good—to see you two—like that again."

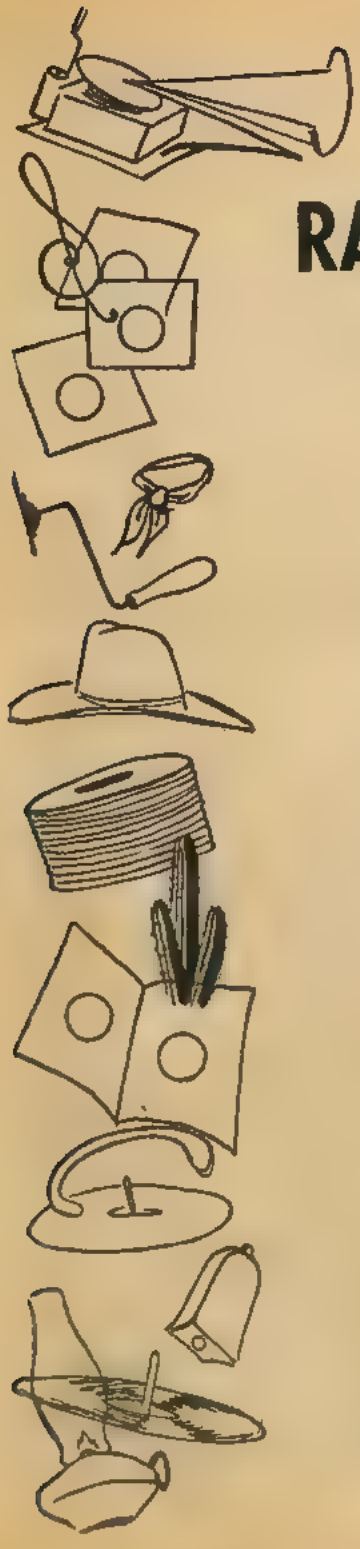
"That's the way we're going to be from here on, Ruddy," said Jord.

"No more running and hiding and fearing," I mused blissfully.

"Maybe I can hang my guns up for good" Jord suggested

The marshal nodded. "I think you can, my boy."

"Except on duty—in the Top Hat," said Ruddock, smiling wanly. "And you never—have to use 'em—there ● ● ●



BOB WILLS got where he is by hard work

By PAT JONES

RANGELAND RECORDS

WHEN Bob Wills was born on a blustery March day in Limestone County, Texas, his father celebrated the event with a lively tune on his fiddle. So proud was Johnny Wills of his first son that his wife often said nobody could tell "whether John was fiddlin' or the baby was yellin'."

It was the most natural thing in the world that Bob should some day become a fiddler, too. Both his grandfathers, nine uncles and four aunts on both sides of the family were known in Texas for their fiddling talents.

But times were hard for the Wills family, and Bob soon had grown-up responsibilities. His mother had been a champion cotton picker before her marriage, and if Bob didn't inherit the talent for picking cotton, he soon learned it. As he grew older, with the secret hope of playing the fiddle professionally, he wore gloves to protect his hands when he worked in the fields.

Bob's father, a dreamer, had a rough time on the unproductive acres of his farm, and supplemented his income by playing the fiddle for local affairs. One day, when Bob was eleven, his father forgot to show up for a ranch dance. Bob didn't have much practice, but he played the only six tunes he knew over and over until the dancers got weary and let him stop—after six hours of playing!

When he was seventeen, the wanderlust got Bob and he left home to hop freights all over the Southwest. After two days without eating, Bob landed in a town where relatives lent him a fiddle, and he earned his first five dollars playing for a local dance. "I played for all I was worth," Bob recalls. "I was hungry!"

For some years Bob did odd jobs. He worked on a construction job, on farms, and as a salesman. Marriage settled him down, and he took up barbering; between shaves he worked in a medicine show. It gave him the taste of show business he needed to try for a spot on a local radio station. He took with him the show's guitar player and banjo player. The manager offered them a fifty-fifty proposition.

"I supply the power—you supply the music."

Bob hated to refuse, but they had to eat. They [Turn page]

(M.G.M. Records Photo)

BOB WILLS

got their first job on station KTAT in Fort Worth, with a flour company as sponsor. They called themselves the "Lightcrust Doughboys." When they weren't on the air, Bob drove a delivery truck, the musicians loaded flour sacks, and his vocalist doubled as salesman.

After a while the show became such a hit that the other duties were suspended. Following a disagreement with the sponsor, Bob left to form "The Texas Playboys," which name they carry today on their MGM records. Though he didn't have a job lined up at the time, his boys gave Bob their loyal support. Soon their earlier success was surpassed. Contrasted with Bob's first six-song repertoire, the Playboys now have 3,600 tunes at their command, and a host of loyal fans for every one.

Bob takes a paternal interest in his Playboys. Let him tell it in his own way: "If you've got some mules that ain't fed enough or well taken care of and treated right, and you try to make 'em plow cotton, why, they'll get about five or six acres a day done. But you take those same mules and feed 'em and treat 'em fine and then switch a harness on 'em and put 'em to a plow and they'll step out and plow ten or twelve acres a day. Musicians are just the same. . . ."

One of the biggest thrills in Bob's life was opening the "Bob Wills Ranch House" in Dallas three years ago. Almost a block long, it accommodates six thousand people. It has a chuckwagon and a sixty-foot bar inlaid with seven hundred silver dollars. Decorated with murals in Western style, it also sports a pair of horns measuring twenty-nine inches around, which Bob thinks the largest in the country.

With television, records and band dates keeping Bob busy, he has plenty of reason to let out with his familiar trademark, "AH-haaaa." But in the back of his mind there is always the thought that "Hard work is the only break anybody needs."

RANGELAND RECORD ROUNDUP

YOU'LL want to go to your local record corral for Bob Wills' latest *MGM* disc of A BROKEN HEART FOR A SOUVENIR and I WANT TO GO TO MEXICO.

I BELIEVE that when all the dust settles, Red Foley's *Decca* waxing of that great tune will be your favorite.

With his version of FREE HOME DEMONSTRATION, Eddie Arnold shows the style that makes him one of *Victor's* super record salesmen.

If you want a square dance in your own living room, you'll go for the DESIGNED FOR DANCING ALBUM OF SQUARE DANCES which the Hot Timers recorded for *Lion*. Billy Barrett calls the sets in a way you'll like.

Hank Snow, who recently did a turn entertaining the troops overseas deserves praise for his *Victor* recording of BETWEEN FIRE AND WATER

The lovely Spanish sentiment, VAYA CON DIOS is handled touchingly by Les Paul and Mary Ford on *Capitol*

***MGM* introduces you to Toby Stroud who in turn wants you to meet MY P'ROXIDE BLONDE. You'll like both these newcomers.**

Homer and Jethro tear up the pea patch in inimitable style with their *Victor* waxing of I'M WALKING BEHIND YOU-ALL.

The Drifting Cowboys with Don Helms as leader fill the *MGM* CORN CRIB with a swell instrumental.

We can't keep from mentioning I COULDN'T KEEP FROM CRYING as Jack and Daniel with The Sourwood Mountain Boys do it on *Decca*. It's backed with a lively version of KNOTHOLE which you'll enjoy too.

Easygoing Rusty Draper scores another hit with his *Mercury* version of GAMBLER'S GUITAR.

Harry Belafonte serenades SUZANNE on *Victor*.

P. S. In case we forgot—you'll like The Hilltoppers' *Dot* waxing P. S. I LOVE YOU.

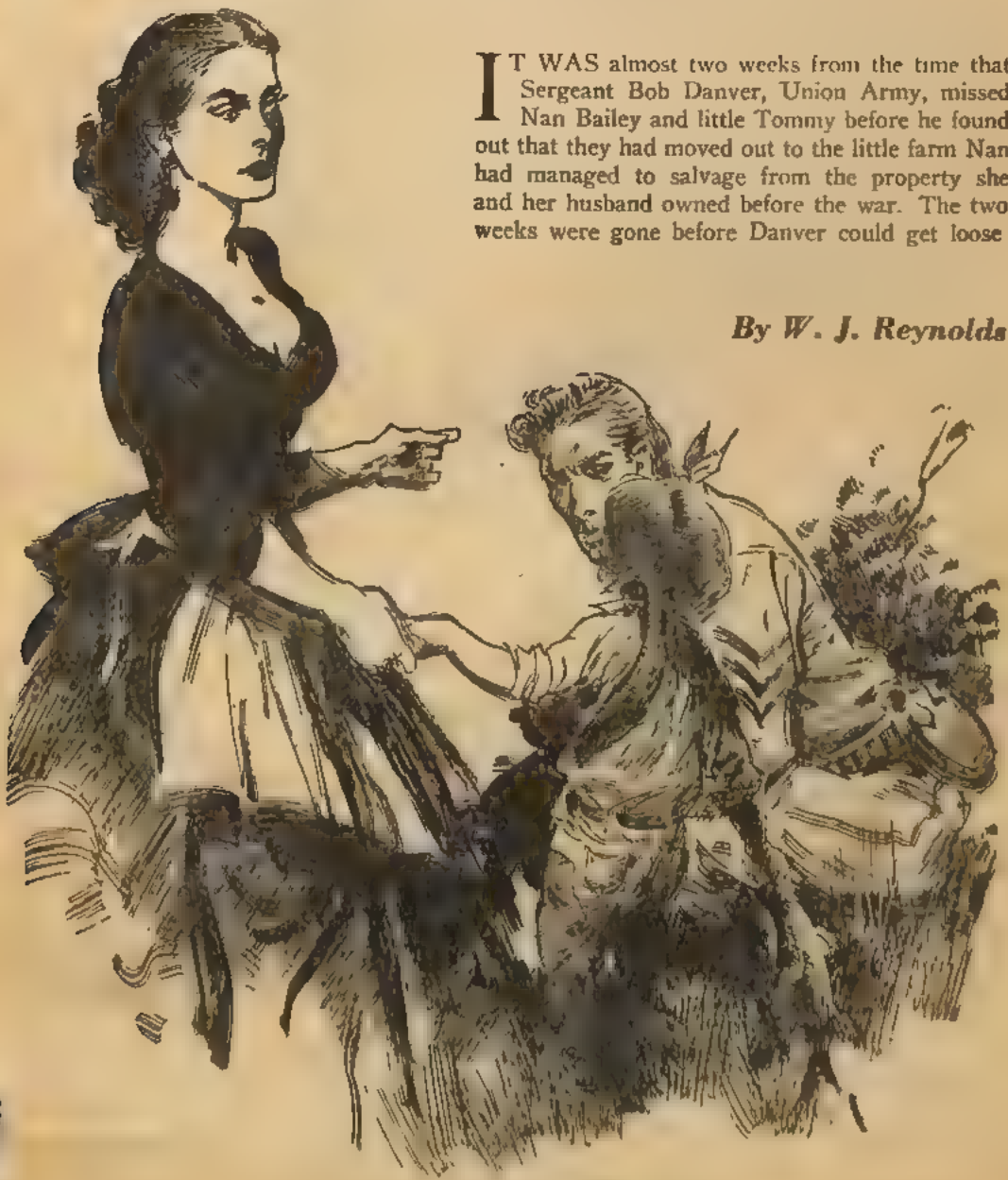
NEEDED—FIGHTING MAN

Nan was sure this man had killed her husband.

Now she was forced to trust him with her own life

IT WAS almost two weeks from the time that Sergeant Bob Danver, Union Army, missed Nan Bailey and little Tommy before he found out that they had moved out to the little farm Nan had managed to salvage from the property she and her husband owned before the war. The two weeks were gone before Danver could get loose

By W. J. Reynolds



The boy proudly carried his share of the fish

from chasing raiding Indians and brush jumpers and skulkers long enough to pursue his somewhat one-sided courtship.

But one morning he sat his cavalry horse in the timber's edge and saw Nan wrestling with a bull tongue plow drawn by Old Nellie, the remnant of the Bailey horse herd Danver sat and cursed softly, and ran his blunt fingers through his red hair. He knew that Nan had seen him already, for she didn't stop or look his way. She was no fool, she well knew the danger she ran out here fifteen miles from town and five from her nearest neighbor. A lone woman, and a pretty one, and the three year-old boy.

Finally Danver rode out to intercept her. The late spring sun had full sway here in the timber-surrounded clearing and her flushed face was beaded with sweat. Exhaustion had taken some of the straightness from her shoulders but as Danver rode up the straightness came back.

"Ma'am," Danver said gruffly, "I thought you were less a fool than to bring yourself and the tyke out here in the woods."

Anger added heat to her face but she held her voice level. "It is no worry of yours, Mr. Danver. I have to live, and Tommy has to live. What else is there? But I suppose you wouldn't know, since you're a Yankee and the Yankees killed my husband at Shiloh. Good day."

She tugged at the plow and pulled the mare around. Danver's face was tight with the desire to hug her and spank her too. His concern for her and the boy had made him stick his big foot into it again. He swung off his horse with purpose and his big hands fastened on the plow handles. Her nearness was almost more than he could resist.

He said brusquely, "Take the tyke to the house. I'll plow."

"Leave me alone, Mr. Danver," she flared. "Your hands are better fitted to a gun."

"My hands fit a plow before, Nan," he said gently. "They will again. My enlistment is up next month. Let go, now."

Her eyes were wide and gray and her back was ramrod straight as she looked at him. But her anger was a defense for something deeper, a desire to have someone she could lean on. He understood it and hoped her attitude would soon change toward him. Another kind word now would send her into tears and make it harder than ever. He waited silently.

She turned abruptly away and walked rapidly toward the shade under which young Tommy took his midmorning nap. Danver looped the rope lines over his heavy shoulders. He spoke to the mare and did not look back until he turned at the other end. Nan was just entering the cabin, with Tommy toddling along behind.

AT NOON she came to wait for him to finish a round. "Dinner's ready."

He took the mare out, watered her at the branch waterhole and stabled her. Noting the depleted pile of corn, he took the ration he'd brought for his own mount and gave it to the mare. His horse whickered indignantly. Danver slapped his fat flank and fastened him in the stall on the opposite side of the crib.

"Stay there and be quiet, fatso," he said smiling. "You'll get corn tonight."

He went to the house and washed at the bench outside the kitchen door, then went in to sit down to cornmeal mush

"It's not much," she said "But Tommy and I haven't starved yet."

"Hope it makes me as enticing as it makes you," he said solemnly.

She glared at him without much conviction and young Tommy giggled.

"Hush, Tommy and eat your dinner." To Danver, she said, "We make out. You don't have to come back."

"Ma'am," he said, "I was raised on a farm, and I can see what this East Texas country is. It's fine farming land, once it's cleared. But it's frontier and plenty hard on a woman even with a man's strong back around. A farm needs a man."

"I had a man"

Danver went on. "But the main worry here is your life, and the young one. Men are still straggling back from the war, men not exactly soldiers, brushjumpers, jayhawkers and riff-raff coming in from other places less safe for them. Most of them would murder you and the boy for no more

than that mare yonder. Then there's the Indians—even a horse stealing party wouldn't hesitate to attack a lone woman and baby."

"I've thought of that," she said. "But I have to live, and there's no other place to go. Besides, Indians don't come around this section much any more. Only a stray from a thieving party now and then, and I have a gun."

He didn't argue. Her tone told him she had her mind made up and would not change. He had to admit to himself that there wasn't much else she could do.

He returned to the plowing, and as the old mare gave signs of being about done in, he took out about midafternoon and turned the mare in the rail pasture behind the barn. He saddled his horse and rode into the bigger bottom toward the creek. He was back in an hour with a buck deer.

He hung it in the tree left in the yard for shade, and she appeared silently with pans and skinning knife. They dressed the fat buck, working easily, almost companionably. Danver was sorry when the job was finished.

Young Tommy hung onto a booted leg while he washed his hands and arms, then yelled with delight as Danver tossed him into the air. He held the boy aloft with one hand and spun him back and forth. Tommy screamed his enjoyment and even Nan smiled from the kitchen door.

"Son," Danver said, "watch after your ma now. I got to go."

"More!" Tommy yelled. "More!"

"Stay for supper," Nan said. "I've cooked the venison."

"I'll grab a bite then I got to go," Danver said. "The captain will hang my hide up to dry. I'll see if I can't make it back to finish the patch, though."

The next day he finished by noon and spent the afternoon chopping stove length wood for Nan. He knocked off in time to take Tommy down to the branch waterhole to fish. For the first time in years, Nan relaxed enough to fall asleep in the warm sun and woke with Danver's gentle hand on her arm.

"Time to go, sleepy head. Sun's nigh down."

He had a string of fish, mostly perch, and Tommy insisted on carrying his share. Danver cut a small replica of his willow with the fork on the end and strung a small perch for Tommy. He carried it proudly and demanded Nan's attention to the accomplishment.

"I cook," Tommy shrilled. "I cook Uncle Bob fish!"

"Uncle Bob, is it?" Nan said. Her eyes were warm.

DANVER didn't return the next day or the next. Nan, when the thought occurred to her that he had had enough and wouldn't return, experienced a sickening disappointment.

Let him stay away, she thought resentfully; she hadn't asked him to come in the first place. She started planting the cotton seed by hand in the plowed ground with Tommy toddling along nearby, demanding answers to his innumerable questions. Nan gave him short answers while she tried to watch the surrounding timber and plant a straight row at the same time.

She had gone a round and was near the cabin when she became aware that she was being watched from the timber. She delayed at the end, pretending to aid Tommy with some interesting discovery in a patch of weeds while she watched. It was an Indian, and he was gradually circling to cut her off from the cabin.

Despite the terror that threatened to take the strength from her legs, Nan started toward the cabin with Tommy, leading him casually by the hand. She forced herself to linger tiredly but watching sharply to see that the Indian didn't get ahead of her. As she turned around the cabin and into the door, she saw from the corner of her eye that the Indian was closing in, skulking on the very edge of the timber. Only his hesitancy, not being sure she was alone, had saved her.

She hurriedly pushed Tommy under the bed with a sharp order to stay there, and whirled to snatch the double-barreled shot-

gun from the wall. She eared back the hammer with shaking hands and turned back to the door just as the Indian leaped inside with upraised tomahawk, voicing the fierce Comanche warwhoop.

Nan shot him full in the breast, and despite her panic she maintained a core of sound reason. Even as the blast hurled him back through the door, she was pulling back the second hammer in case there were others.

But there was no other sound except the frightened whimpering of Tommy under the bed. "Be quiet, baby. Mother will tell you when to come out. When the bad men are all gone. Be quiet and go to sleep if you want." She was astonished at her calm voice.

After a while reaction hit her and she barred the door and sat against it shaking and biting her apron, stuffing it in her mouth to stifle the sobs that would alarm Tommy. She was aware that his sniffles had ceased and guessed that he had gone to sleep.

It took Nan two hours to drag the Indian to the woods, dig a shallow grave and bury him. Later she stopped outside the cabin and cried herself out. Washing her face, and removing signs of the tears, she went in and pulled the sleeping Tommy from under the bed and put him on it. She was just turning away from the bed when the pound of hoofs came from outside.

Through a crack in the door, she saw Danver and six cavalrymen. She opened the door.

"Nan," Danver said, and his voice shook. "Nan, are you all right?"

"Yes."

He swung off his horse to confront her, his eyes dark with concern. She was haggard and her eyes were still swollen a little.

"We've been chasing Indians, he said. "There's a big party raiding the country, and several strays have been sighted close to town. Mr. Healy, across the creek, took a shot at one this morning trying to steal his horse. You sure you haven't seen any?" His nose was twitching and he leaned past her to sniff inside the cabin.

"I saw one," Nan said.

He grabbed her arms, pulling her around to face him. "Nan. You've fired the gun inside the cabin—" He was suddenly looking at the ground under his feet and the dark spot in the dust. His face went white.

"Nan, did that Indian—was he here—"

HIS ARMS went around her and she was crying again against the wool of his jacket, sobbing out her story. He seemed afraid to move, and he held her tightly. Finally Nan pulled away, conscious of the grins of the troopers. Danver sat down on the bench, still shaken.

Suddenly he glared at the grinning troopers. "Get out of here!" he shouted. "Wait at the barn!" They obeyed silently, still grinning.

Danver stood up and spoke to Nan. "I ain't gonna be responsible for you out here. You go pack up and we'll take you to town."

She looked at him steadily, "Mr. Danver, I have a crop to make, a living to earn. I have half of it already planted. This is my home, and I plan to stay. And I didn't know that you were responsible for me." She turned into the house and shut the door.

Danver said with firm calm, "Nan Bailey, I ain't wanted to scare you but you got to face the facts. There's Indians like this one today, and even parties of them, that'll kill you and the boy. Then there are brushjumping renegades and middle border desperadoes that'll do the same, and worse. Nan, for God's sake!"

Nan jerked open the door and faced him with bright eyes, and her voice was unsteady. "Sergeant Danver, don't think I don't know you. You're no better than the others, brushjumpers or not. Your side killed my husband, and I'll make out the best I can as long as I can. I'll take it as a kindness if you mind your own business henceforth!"

She slammed the door and leaned against it, and didn't cry until she heard the troopers ride off and the sound of them fade into the timber. Then Nan Bailey was more lonely than she had ever been before. It was a terrible nerve-wracking loneliness, and

danger seemed to lurk in each gloomy corner. Finally terror possessed her and she cowered in the cabin and only the protesting cries from Tommy made her feed him some venison stew. Then she crawled into bed with him and covered them both.

It was a week later that Nan heard the shot in the timber near the cabin, a man's heavy curses and a yell and the sound of a solid object splatting against another object. She was in the cabin with the shotgun ready when Danver rode from the timber, another man preceding him. The other wore broken cavalry boots, and faded blue pants, with a butternut hat and shirt. Blood ran down his face, dripping from a mousy beard.

"Found him sneaking around in the woods," Danver said with a sour glance at her. "He tried to pot me but changed his mind, if he's got a mind."

The very fact that Danver was always right made Nan furious—that and the safe feeling she had when he showed up. "He's hurt," she said.

"I ought to've killed him," Danver growled.

Nan got pan and water and cloth and started sponging the cut that turned out to be little more than a bruise. But as she cleaned the wound, she noted that Danver's face reddened and his big hand tightened on the gun. He glared at her.

The yellow eyes of the skulker were crafty. "Us Confederate soldiers has it mighty hard, ma'am. Ain't no place we can go to get away from the Yankees. I was just figuring to ask for a bite to eat when this Yankee jumped on me with his pistol. You'd think the war wasn't over, the way he acts."

Danver swung off his horse and took a step toward the man, who backed hastily around Nan. "I ought to've jumped you with a bullet," Danver growled, "And I might do it yet!"

"Leave him alone!" Nan snapped. She finished the cleaning, and then turned into the house and came back quickly with a hunk of boiled venison and a square of cornbread. She gave it to the man and he fell onto it hungrily. "You can go now," Nan said.

With Danver watching in disapproving silence, he scuttled for the timber but even Nan did not miss the glances he kept throwing at the barn lot, and the mare there.

"Maybe you can figure some way to blame me if he steals your horse tonight," Danver said and swung back on his horse.

Nan stared at him, fear beginning to steal over her. She had been a fool. The big sergeant had been protecting her, and the thanks he got was rudeness. And for his concern for her, she had shown only contempt.

"I got my discharge today," Danver said. "Reckon I'll head for Ohio tomorrow. Goodby, Nan."

Words froze in her throat, words that if spoken would bring him off the horse instantly. But she didn't speak them and he rode swiftly into the timber. The world was suddenly very empty for Nan Bailey.

A HALF-HOUR later the man was again at the timber's edge. Nan hurried into the house and appeared at the window with the shotgun. But the man had stopped well away from the cabin. There was an ingratiating smile behind his mousy beard.

"Shucks, now ma'am," he said. "No call to get scared. Name's Driper—I fought with Hood. I'd like mightily to have some more grub. Ain't had a square meal in a week—"

Hairy hands fastened on the gunbarrel and wrenched as Nan cried out and tried to jerk the gun back inside. The jerk pulled the triggers and the shotgun thundered. The downward pull of the man under the window slipped the butt from her shoulder, and the recoil slapped the butt against her chin. Nan went out in a blaze of light.

When she came to Nan saw Driper's grinning, sly face, and beyond him, wolfing food, a chunky man in clothes as ragged as Driper's. The second man had a hard, shiny face under a week-old brown beard.

"What'd I tell you, Coke," Driper said. "Ain't she a hummer when she looks at you with them big gray eyes?"

With full consciousness, Nan looked wildly about for Tommy and finally saw him sitting in a far corner, eyes big with fright,

and one jaw turning dark where he had been hit. Furious rage flamed in Nan.

"Danver was right," she lashed at them. "You're skulkers and murderers. You were never in the army."

"Shore we was," Driper said. "We fought with Quantrill. Had some right lively parties." His yellow eyes went suddenly flinty and cruel. "We take what we want—and we want your horse, two horses. Don't tell me you have none. We know how you farmers hides your stock in the bottoms. We seen too many horses tracks around here. You tell us where they are." He looked at Tommy meaningly.

Horror made Nan weak. "You wouldn't dare harm that baby."

"Woman," Driper said, "I'd as soon knock that boy's head against the wall as yours. We'll just burn down the cabin, and who can say how you two was killed?" He suddenly grinned again and his eyes had a strange gleam in them.

Nan shuddered and shrank against the wall, her mouth as dry as cotton. The horror of Driper's words made her numb.

It was a moment before Nan's senses could register the fact that Danver's big form had slid in through the door. His long-barreled Colt was in his hand, and she would never forget the deadly fury in his white face.

"Start batting my head against the wall, you damned renegades!" Danver spoke through gritted teeth.

Coke turned like a cat, gun leaping into his fist. Driper bawled a startled oath and grabbed for the shotgun one of them had leaned against the wall.

Danver shot Coke twice and the renegade's shot went into the ceiling. Nan grabbed the first thing her hands fell on, a cast iron skillet, and hurled it at Driper. It hit him in the back and he fell, but he was on his knees like a lean cat and the shotgun whirled in a murderous blow at Danver's head.

The big sergeant dodged and calmly slapped his gun barrel solidly against Driper's head. There was a sound like a broken egg and Driper flopped on the floor.

Danver's voice was loud in the sudden stillness. "Might as well a shot him. But it ain't no loss." He looked at Nan, who sagged against the wall. "I seen the other feller sneaking around and figured I'd better hang around for a while."

Danver got a shovel and dragged the two bodies into the timber. He was gone a long time and when he came back, Nan was crooning softly to the sleepy baby. He waited patiently until Tommy slept and Nan came to the door.

"I'll ride in and report this to the army," he said. "I'll speak to the captain, too, and maybe he'll send somebody around once in a while to see about you and Tommy." He turned to mount. "Good-by, Nan."

Nan stepped through the door and suddenly found her tongue. "Bob Danver, you come back here! I've been a fool and you know it, and somebody's got to watch me closer than once in a while!"

He turned, his freckled face was full of his grin. He wasn't leaving, and he had no intention of leaving—not for long. But Nan didn't care, she never wanted him to leave. She wanted always to have that big grin around in easy reach.

"Don't go, Bob Danver," she said. "I want you to stay here. Finally, I can tell you I love you."

It was a long step even for Danver. But he made it without any trouble. ● ● ●

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ROMANCE *on the* RANGE

HE MET her on the range one day,
A blue-eyed, smiling lass,
With his big bay he blocked the road
And wouldn't let her pass.

"This range you're on is mine," said he,
"Each cranny, nook and knoll,
And if you aim to cross my land,
One kiss will be the toll."

She smiled sweet and shook her head,
Like it was all in fun,
She held him there all moony-eyed,
While she hauled her great big gun!

"A kiss is earned, a bullet burned,
Which will it be?" said she.
"If I have to shoot, you handsome cuss,
I'll still not pay your fee."

He sweat and squirmed and bluffed a mite,
But he didn't care to die,
He reined aside—then saw it sure;
She winked when she went by!

His lasso rope he shook out fast,
And after her he flew,
Now they're wed and have three kids,
All because his loop fell true!

By CY KEES

When the girl saw him, she started to cry

A Girl Called SUNDAY

By Ben Frank

She had no name, no memory, but Bendy knew her— he'd met her in a dream. . . .

ANY WAY you looked at it, it was a fine Sunday afternoon in late June. Watching a certain long, lean, cotton-headed cowboy jogging across the landscape, trailed by his Uncle Alf's hound dog, you'd have thought he didn't have a care in the world.

His name was Benson "Bendy" Bigmun. He was twenty-three years old and strong and healthy enough to feel ten feet tall. He didn't have no wife to worry him—not even a girl he cared enough about to feel jealous over. He and his Uncle Alf owned the Bar B ranch lock stock and barrel, and had money in the Deepwell bank to boot. But if you must know the sad truth, there was one fly in Bendy's soup. A two-legged, six-foot-one, big-fisted fly by the name of Harv Hawley, a

gent who owned the neighboring Diamond ranch.

However, on this particularly fine day, stuffed to the gills with his Aunt Hannah's chicken and mince pie, Bendy resolve to cast aside all worrisome thoughts of Harv—the ornery, hoggish coyote—and enjoy himself. Coming to Turtle Creek, he slid from the saddle, kicked off his boots and dangled his big feet in the cool, clear water. And before you could count to fifty, he had leaned back against a pine, closed his innocent sky-blue eyes and gone sound asleep.

Like as not, that second slice of mince pie had something to do with his dreaming he was being kissed by a very pretty girl, with soft red lips and a smell of apple blossoms about her. Anyway, it was a very pleasant dream until he opened his eyes and discovered it wasn't no girl at all. It was Nuisance, his uncle's hound dog, running a long, wet tongue over Bendy's bony, unhandsome face.

"Darn it, Nuisance," Bendy snorted, shoving the lop-eared, sad-eyed dog away, "can't a man set down and—" His voice choked off, and his eyes bugged.

Nestled on the ground between Nuisance's clumsy front feet lay a pink and white silk scarf, the kind a young lady might tie about her hair on a windy day. The next thing the long-legged cowpoke knew, he was holding the scarf to his sun-burned nose and sniffing. Sure enough, there it was, a faint smell of apple blossoms!

"Nuisance," he gurgled, "where'd you find that scarf?"

Looking proud, Nuisance took a few steps on along a tree-lined path and then waited for Bendy to follow. But before the young man could get his number eleven boots on, there came the sounds of horses crashing through the underbrush.

BENDY never could figure out afterwards what made him cram the scarf into a pocket of his faded levis. But he did. And lifting his startled eyes, he felt a slight chill fiddle up his long, lean spine.

Harv Hawley had come bursting through a thick growth of scrub pines. Trailing him was Deputy Sheriff Lou Fowler, making as ornery a looking pair as you'd ever hope to see. Discovering Bendy standing there with one boot on and the other off, the two riders pulled up short and stared in surprise.

"Just the gent we want to see, ain't he, Lou?" Harv sputtered; and the deputy blinked foolishly and nodded his shaggy head.

Bendy put on the other boot. Wasn't sure what was about to happen, but he figured it would be smart to have both feet shod. Ever since he and Harv had been kids together in school, they'd rubbed each other the wrong way. And owning neighboring ranches hadn't done anything to make them chummy.

"Hello, boys," Bendy said somewhat pleasantly. He figured he could hold his own with either of them, but he had an idea that taking both on at the same time might prove disastrous. "What did you want to see me about?"

"I figure I've got a right to water at the North Hole," Harv said, "and the sheriff here agrees with me. Don't you, Lou?"

Now, Lou Fowler wasn't no more a sheriff than nothing. He was simply a second-rate cowboy who had worked on the Diamond for Harv and had got his appointment as deputy sheriff of the Deepwell end of the county mainly through Harv's string-pulling.

"Yes, sir!" he said, trying to look smarter than he was. "In fact, after some thorough investigating of the situation, I'd say that the Bar B cattle ain't got no right to water there a-tall."

"You crazy?" Bendy yelled, forgetting caution. "Why, the Bar B has been watering in the North Hole ever since—"

"You heard what the law said," Harv cut in coldly.

Bendy snorted and cussed. "Law? You call that snake-eyed polecat the law. Why, he ain't—"

"If I wasn't so busy today," Lou cut in darkly, "I'd learn you some manners, Bigmun. But as it is, I got to hurry on to town."

With that the two men rode on.

There wasn't a thing Bendy could do but stand there and turn the air blue. That North Hole on Turtle Creek was mighty important to the welfare of the Bar B, and—That was when he rammed his fists into his pockets and remembered the silk scarf.

"Nuisance," he said, waving the scarf under the hound's eager nose, "show me where you found this."

Wagging his tail, Nuisance headed upstream. Bendy swung aboard his paint horse and followed. Nuisance knew exactly where he was going. A half mile farther on, he led the way into a small clearing. And sitting on an old stump, her soft brown hair tumbled about her pale cheeks, was a small, slender girl.

SEEING BENDY, the girl stared up at him out of frightened eyes. Lovely, blue-gray eyes, with long dark lashes. A shiver went through her, and she put her hands over her face and began to cry.

"Hey," Bendy said in alarm, "there's nothing to cry—"

That was when he saw the ugly bruise just behind her right ear. There was some blood matted in her dark hair, too.

He slid to the ground and hurried to her. She wore a dark blue riding skirt, badly torn. Her blouse was ripped at the shoulder, and the creamy flesh had some dirt ground into it. Her boots were scuffed and caked with dried mud.

"I'm Benson Bigmun," he said gently, "but folks call me Bendy. Don't remember seeing you before, miss. If you'll tell me your name—"

"That's the trouble," she said brokenly. "I can't seem to remember my name. Or how I got here. Or anything!"

"You can't remem—"

Bendy's startled voice died in his throat. The girl had lifted her face again. She had a sweet red mouth—just like the girl in his dream.

She was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, and sitting there, looking so unhappy and helpless—well, Bendy wanted to take her in his arms like she was some little lost kid and tell her she didn't have a thing to worry about now. But she was twenty or so, and a young man can't hardly take a strange twenty-year-old girl in his arms and—

"I don't know what's happened to me," she wailed. "All I know is that I'm here and my head hurts like fury and I feel a little sick at my stomach and I'm—going to faint."

She closed her eyes and toppled forward, and Bendy caught her in his arms. There it was again, that faint smell of apple blossoms!

Scared—Bendy had never been so scared in his life. He held her close, feeling the warm softness of her, and was so afraid she was dead that he didn't know what to do. But presently she opened her eyes and smiled wanly.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I don't want to be any trouble, but—"

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "I'll take you to Aunt Hannah. She'll know what to do."

She was as light as a feather. Couldn't weigh more than a hundred and five or ten. He lifted her on his paint, steadied her, swung on behind.

All the way to the Bar B, he held her half-cradled in his arms, her head against his shoulders. Her hair kept brushing his face, and there was that wonderful faint perfume. Bendy knew he'd never forget that ride as long as he lived. Arriving at the Bar B, he slid carefully to the ground and carried the girl into the old ranch house.

Seeing him with his arms full of girl, Bendy's Aunt Hannah and Uncle Alf jumped to their feet like they'd been spooked by the blast of a cannon. But Aunt Hannah didn't stop to ask questions.

"Put her in the spare bedroom," she snapped.

She was a plump, motherly little woman, with white hair and round pink cheeks. She heated water, made tea and boiled up some chicken broth.

"You three clowns vamoose," she said to Bendy, Uncle Alf and Nuisance, "while I take care of the girl."

The three clowns wandered out into the yard and sat down in the shade of a cottonwood.

"You bring home the dangedest things," the oldster said, glaring at his cotton-headed nephew. "Always have. Never will forget the time you brought home a passel of baby skunks."

Ignoring this, Bendy told where he'd found the girl. Then he mentioned his encounter with Harv Hawley and Lou Fowler.

"Blast them coyotes!" old Alf said, spitting angrily. "We'll have to keep a eye on that North Hole all summer."

By and by, Hannah let them into the house again. The girl was sitting up in bed, looking much better, now that she was cleaned up and full of hot food.

"Think hard, honey," Hannah said. "Can't you remember anything that happened before Bendy found you?"

She shook her head and suddenly looked frightened again.

"Well, don't let it get you down," Hannah said. "A good night's rest will likely fix you up. In the meantime, we've got to have a name for you. Today's Sunday—we'll call you Sunday."

THE GIRL smiled, and to Bendy, her smile was like the turning on of a light in a dark room. His heart began to thud. Come to think of it, no girl had ever before made him feel quite so fluttery. Then glancing about, he discovered that his aunt and uncle and Nuisance had sneaked out on him.

"I guess I've never thanked you," Sunday said, her eyes misting over slightly.

"No need to," Bendy said huskily.

Suddenly he had an almost overwhelming desire to take her in his arms and kiss her a good one right on her soft, red mouth. Scared half to death by this ungentlemanly impulse, he turned and fled.

"Funny thing," Aunt Hannah was saying, "Sunday had almost fifty dollars pinned to her petticoat. She can't remember where she got the money, or anything."

"As soon as she remembers," old Alf murmured, "we'll get in touch with her folks and send her home."

Bendy went on outside. Of course, he wanted Sunday to recover her memory, but he knew that life wasn't never going to be the same after she went away. . . .

The next morning, Sunday felt rested. She felt fine. But she couldn't remember who she was, or where she had come from, or how she'd gotten to the place where Bendy found her. She tried to joke bravely about it, but it wasn't exactly a joking matter. And her gray-blue eyes filled with tears, and she broke down and cried.

"Don't cry," Bendy said. "We'll take care of you!"

It wasn't what he said, it was the way he said it that made Hannah and Alf exchange startled glances. Also, it made Sunday stop crying. As for Bendy, not having no idea what had made him say such a thing in such a way, he put on his ten-gallon hat and hurried outside for a breath of fresh air.

That afternoon, Bendy and his uncle rode over to the North Hole on Turtle Creek. Sure enough, Harv Hawley had driven a bunch of his Diamond steers over that way.

"Blast that polecat, anyhow!" old Alf stormed. "Reckon it'll be a continual wrangle from now on."

Cussing and yelling, they drove the steers back on Diamond range. By the time they returned to the Bar B, darkness had begun to fall.

Supper over, Bendy and Sunday drifted outside and stood under the starry sky, listening to the crickets and watching the moon lift up out of the west.

"Bendy," she said, "sometimes I feel as if I'm about to remember everything, and then I'm frightened. It's as if—as if I was running away from something. And when I'm frightened like that, I don't want to remember."

She stood very close to him, and he reached out and touched her clean soft hair. Then he put an arm about her and let her lean against him. She didn't seem to mind. In fact, she was like some tired child who expected him to protect her.

"Someone is surely looking for you, Sunday," he said. "Tomorrow, I'll ride to Deepwell to see what's going on. Would have gone today, but we thought either someone would come looking for you, or that you'd remember."

"Perhaps I should go to Deepwell with you."

"No," he said. "You still need to take it easy. Anyway, it would be a long, hot trip."

She didn't argue about it. Maybe, in a way, she was afraid of the past. Afraid of what she might learn about herself. But no matter what she thought, she stood there, letting the moon touch her eyes and her cheeks and her slender white throat; and

Benson "Bendy Bigmun was almost afraid if he took a long breath, the spell of this wonderful moment would be broken.

"Sunday," he said softly, "I'd do anything to help you!"

IN DEEPWELL, the next day, Bendy listened to all the talk going on, but not once did he hear anyone mention a lost girl. At last, he wandered into the Ace-High Saloon. Quite a number of loafers were there—a few playing cards with Slim Slater, the house gambler, others just gabbing. But none of the talk meant a thing to Bendy. Stepping out on the street again, he came face to face with Harv Hawley.

Harv looked bigger standing on his feet than he did in a saddle. He shoved hands into pockets and scowled.

"Bigmun," he said, "somebody chased a bunch of my stock away from the North Hole yesterday. Any idea who did it?"

Bendy took a quick glance around. Deputy Lou Fowler had stepped from his office and was watching and waiting. Any way Bendy looked at it, it was a poor time to start a fight, but he was getting plumb tired of backing down everytime Harv opened his big mouth.

"I drove them steers away," he said. "And any time I find any of your stuff there, I'll do it again!"

"Yeah!" Harv said darkly. "Maybe it's time me and you settled some things, once and for all!"

"Yeah," Bendy agreed, balling his fists. "Now—"

A hoarse cry interrupted him. Turning, they both saw something that made them forget they were about to knock each other's teeth out. An old hunter and trapper by the name of Bush Buzz had ridden into the street on a flea-bitten donkey, trailing a gray saddle pony. Draped across the pony was a blanket wrapped bundle that could be but one thing.

Bendy and Harv legged it over to the gathering crowd. Old Bush Buzz unroped the bundle and eased it to the ground. Deputy Fowler turned back the old horseblanket. Everybody stood staring in silence at the gray, twisted face of a dead man. A kid, almost. No more than eighteen years old.

"Heard shooting Sunday morning," Bush Buzz said, "but didn't pay it no mind. Yesterday, that gray saddle hoss drifted over to my cabin. Today, I happened to be moseying through Turtle Creek Canyon and run across a fresh-dug grave."

"Who'n thunder is he?" someone asked.

"I know who he is," Slim Slater, the gambler, spoke up. "Knew him back in Checker County. Name's Floyd Adams."

"Never heard of no Floyd Adams," someone else muttered

Deputy Lou Fowler swallowed audibly and scrubbed a nervous hand across his big flat nose. "He's a young gent who's mixed up with Jack Bundy and his outfit," he said.

"Say," Bendy spoke up, "ain't they the outlaws who shot a bank cashier a few days ago down south of here?"

"Yeah," Fowler nodded "I've got all their pictures in my files."

Bendy went on along the street, putting two and two together. The day he'd found the girl, this shooting had taken place. Could it be that Sunday was mixed up in the killing of an outlaw? He didn't know, but he was a mighty troubled young man. Coming to Doc Long's office, he almost forgot to stop like he'd planned.

Doc grinned and shoved a chair toward Bendy. "You look right healthy to be visiting me," he said.

Bendy sat down and told the old medico about the girl.

"Hard to say what's wrong," Doc said, frowning. "It might be that bump on her head. Or maybe she had some bad shock, something her conscious mind doesn't want to remember. I'm no expert on this kind of thing, Bendy, but I'll be glad to drop around tomorrow to take a look at her."

"Thanks, Doc," Bendy said gratefully. "Anything we could do to help her remember?"

Slowly Doc shook his white head. "No telling what would turn the trick. Maybe hearing a name she knows. Or seeing a familiar face But likely the best medicine is rest and kindness."

Bendy stood and put on his hat "Maybe we ought to keep this thing quiet until "

"I won't say a word," Doc Long promised.

THAT EVENING, Bendy and Sunday sat alone on the front porch of the Bar B ranch house.

That day, the girl and Hannah had been busy, making over one of Hannah's dresses for Sunday to wear. The dress fit the clean, round curves of her willowy body to perfection. Light from a window fell across her lovely face, making a picture that Bendy reckoned he'd always remember. Her soft

"I'm not going on the warpath with you—I got a deferment!"

mouth was smiling faintly, the breeze tumbled her hair—

"Floyd Adams," she said slowly. "Floyd—no, I guess the name doesn't mean anything to me. I'm sorry, Bendy."

She sank back, her face hidden in shadows. "I don't know what to do," she said. "I can't stay on here like this. I—somehow, some way I've got to remember who I am. I try so hard, and it's like running against a blank wall. I'm frightened, Bendy. Terribly frightened!"

He took her small hands in his big brown paws. Her fingers were icy cold and trembling. He wasn't sure what to say, so he didn't say anything. They sat like that for a long time, just listening to the night sounds and watching the moon climb into a cloudless sky.

The following day, Doc Long drifted out to the Bar B. Pretended he'd come to check on Uncle Alf's rheumatics, and while he was at it, he said, he might as well take a look at that bruise on Sunday's noggin.

Later, the old medico told Bendy that the bump on the girl's head didn't amount to much. "Might've stunned her for a short time," he said, "but it wasn't the cause of her losing her memory. She's likely had a bad scare or shock, and losing her memory is her mind's way of forgetting what's happened to her."

"Will she ever remember?" Bendy asked.

"Chances are she will. Like I said, a familiar face or name might do the trick. Or she may wake up some morning and be herself again. You never know in a case of this kind."

With a cheerful farewell, Doc climbed into his rattly buggy and drove away.

That evening, Bendy asked the girl if she'd like to go for a ride. Or maybe she didn't know if she could ride a horse?

"Yes," she said slowly, "I believe I can ride. In fact, it seems I once rode a gray horse—or did I? I'm so confused about everything."

He saddled the paint for himself and a gentle roan for her. The moon was bright and as round as a dollar. You couldn't ask for a night more suitable for going riding with a pretty girl—even if she didn't know her own name.

They didn't go anyplace in particular; they just rode around. Coming to an outcropping of sandstone, they dismounted and sat down, with their feet dangling over the edge of a low cliff.

"Bendy," she asked presently in a frightened whisper, "did it ever occur to you that perhaps I've always been- not right men-

tally? That I might have escaped from some institution, or—"

She began to cry, and he put a comforting arm about her shoulders and drew her close.

"That's a fool thing to think," he said.

"But you can't tell *what* I might have been! Or what I may have done. Perhaps I've killed someone. Perhaps—"

He gave her a shake. "Stop it! I ought to turn you over my knee and spank you for talking like that!"

But he didn't. Instead, he tipped her face up and kissed her. And suddenly she was crying and clinging to him and pressing her wet face against his.

It was all pretty wonderful until they came back to earth with a jolt and remembered that they didn't have no business making love to each other.

"Please, Bendy," she said in a tired, hollow voice, "don't touch me. Don't ever kiss me again until— I know for sure who I am, or—"

She didn't finish. She didn't need to. He understood how it was. He sat there, swinging his big feet and hating all the unknown, frightening things that stood between them. After she'd climbed into the saddle, he mounted his paint, and they rode back to Bar B, both afraid of the future.

EARLY the next morning, Bendy and Uncle Alf rode over to the North Hole. Again they found some of the Diamond cattle where they had no right to be.

"Maybe it's time we went over to the Diamond and had a showdown with Harv," Alf said angrily. "Even if I have got some rheumatics, I can still handle a shootin' iron!"

"Yeah, and wind up in Lou Fowler's jail," Bendy said. "Maybe if we give Harv enough rope, he'll get himself tangled up in it."

They drove the steers back toward the Diamond and then rode on into Turtle Creek Canyon. Eventually they found where Floyd Adams had been killed and buried, but didn't pick up any clues pertaining to the girl. Even Nuisance couldn't find anything worth sniffing at.

"I ain't exactly blind," Alf said as they rode homeward. "You've jumped your track for that girl, ain't you, son?"

Bendy admitted he had; and the old gent chomped his tobacco in silence, a worried look on his whiskery face.

"I hope it works out all right," he said at last. "But I got a hunch there's likely trouble ahead."

Bendy had had that same hunch all day. He glanced uneasily at the shadows tipped against the red wall of the canyon.

"Let's head for home," he muttered.

Along toward four o'clock, they rode into the Bar B yard. Hannah heard them and came hurrying out.

"Sunday's gone," she announced bluntly. "Saddled the roan a few minutes after you left this morning. Said she was going for a little ride. The roan came home alone about a half-hour ago, with this note fastened to the saddle."

She pulled a slip of paper from her pocket and handed it to Bendy.

"Dear friends," he read, "I've decided you've put up with me long enough. Thank you for everything, and please don't worry about me, or try to find me. I will get along fine now. Good-by. The Girl You Called Sunday."

Bendy handed the note to Uncle Alf, who read it and snorted and growled like a grizzly with a knot in his tail.

"I don't like it," he said. "Not a danged bit!"

Bendy didn't say nothing.

"At least she won't starve for a few days," Hannah said. "She took her money along."

Hands in pockets, shoulders slumped, the cotton-headed cowboy stumbled out to the horse barn. He wanted to be alone, didn't even want Uncle Alf's hound dog sitting there, looking at him out of them mournful eyes. Couldn't remember the time when he'd felt so downright dispirited. He eased down on a bale of hay, cupped his big chin in his hands and stared vacantly at nothing.

Why did Sunday run away like this? Because she knew he had fallen in love with her and was afraid maybe she was somebody else's girl? And why didn't she want him to try to follow her? He didn't have any of the answers. All he knew was that he felt as if he was tumbling downward head over heels.

He was still sitting there when his Aunt Hannah found him

"Well," she snapped, "what're you going to do about it? Find her, forget her, or sit around the rest of your life like a dying calf?"

"How could I possibly find her?" Bendy muttered.

"Ride to town ask if a girl took a train—can't figure how else she could get out of the country."

Bendy shook his head He was remembering the part of the note that said, "Don't try to find me.

He knew that if that was the way she felt about it, that was the way it had to be No doubt she had a good reason for not wanting him to find her

Reckon I'll sit around like a dying calf," he said.

Knowing there wasn't nothing she could do to cheer him, Hannah trotted back to the house

A COUPLE minutes later, Uncle Alf popped his whiskery face through the door and said, "Looks like visitors coming our way, son."

They stood in the shade of the barn and watched two riders merge from the dust fog.

"Strangers," Bendy said presently.

The riders came swinging up to the yard fence one long and thin, the other squat and beefy. They hit the ground with heavy thuds, shifted their guns around where they'd be handy, and shuffled through the dust toward Bendy and old Alf. The hackles on Nuisance's neck bristled, but he didn't offer to bite anybody's leg off

"Howdy," the thin man said He grinned with his mouth, but his eyes were like bits of pale blue ice "You gents run this place?"

Bendy nodded. He didn't like the looks of this thin gent. Or the beefy one, either, for that matter.

"You couldn't tell us where we might find

High Country Cooking

THE NEW BRIDE was proud of her cooking abilities—until she went with her Forest Service husband to a lookout some 10,000 feet high. Then everything seemed to go wrong: bread rose until it ran out of the pans and threatened to run out the wood-range oven; cakes were soggy or coarse-textured; and even vegetables gave her trouble.

"It's the altitude," the amused husband assured her. He told her to talk to the wife of a nearby ranger who had spent many years in the high country.

The young woman found it *was* the altitude—and many people going from lower altitudes to high country have trouble when cooking certain things. Science has taken the guesswork out of high altitude cooking headaches—and one of the leaders has been the Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station at Fort Collins, Colorado.

Baking powder is a touchy ingredient, and must be decreased around ten per cent, or one-quarter of a teaspoon, for every thousand-foot increase in altitude. Sugar, flour, water content, shortening and baking heat all complicate matters.

Sugar content must be decreased sharply, or else more flour and water added, for altitude has a tenderizing effect on batter—so it must be heavier than usual. Hydrogenated shortening is better than other types, it has been found. Both soda and baking powder must be decreased if sugar and water content have been left unchanged.

O her points to remember: extra water should be added in form of eggs or milk; measurements must be more accurate; and baking heat should be increased as baking time is longer than at lower altitudes.

——*Sam Brant*

a girl, could you? Brown hair. Right pretty About so tall."

Bendy knew whom the man meant and felt a shiver chill along his spine. "What's her name?" he stalled

"Her name don't make no difference." The man's voice had turned brittle "Likely wouldn't use her right name, anyway."

Dropping a hand to his gun, the beefy man stepped forward. "We met an old trapper who told us he found a stray gray horse. Ain't likely she would go far a-foot, so—"

"Who are they looking for?" Hannah asked, hurrying around the corner of the barn

The thin man whipped off his hat and bowed politely. "Ma'am, we're looking for a young girl who got lost."

"Oh!" Hannah smiled. "You must mean Sunday Well—" That was when she got a good look into the sidewinder's eyes and knew she had said the wrong thing.

Both men laughed shortly, and the thin hombre said, "We'll just take a look around the house."

They whipped out their sixes and prodded the Bigmuns across the yard and into the front room of the old house. The beefy man continued to keep a gun in his fist, while the other man searched through the various rooms. When he returned, his eyes were glittery slits

"Found some things she left," he said, holding up the torn skirt and blouse. "It might interest you folks to know I'm Jack Bundy, and this is my partner, Fats Ford And when we want something, we get it!"

Bendy felt his blood run cold Two gents wanted for robbery and murder wouldn't stop at anything to get what they'd come after, there was no mistake about that

"We want the girl," Bundy went on in a gritty voice, "because she can tell us where the money is"

"You mean those few dollars she had pinned to her clothes?" Hannah asked. "Well, she took 'em when she left here, and—"

"I mean twenty thousand dollars! The money Floyd Adams had when he was killed Keep on talking, lady, and"

A clatter of horse's hoofs cut him short Bendy glanced through a window. Sunday had ridden up on a foamed-flecked horse. Leaping to the ground she ran toward the house.

Bundy grinned cruelly and nodded to Ford. Both men stepped behind the open front door where they would least likely be seen by the girl.

Sunday stumbled into the room With a little cry, she flew straight into Bendy's arms Her face was as white as death

"They're following me, Bendy!" she gasped.

"Who?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I remember who I am. I went to Deepwell intending to take a train and go away—anywhere—not knowing who I was, I was afraid to stay here. And then I saw Slim Slater, the gambler. He's from my old home town in Checker County. I met him on the street, and when he said, 'Well, if it isn't Elizabeth Adams,' I remembered everything."

NOW SHE was crying as she talked; and one look into the muzzle of Jack Bundy's gun told Bendy the smart thing to do was to let her keep talking.

"Bendy," she sobbed, "Floyd Adams was my kid brother. He got mixed up with the wrong crowd Outlaws But when he saw them shoot down a bank cashier in cold blood, he decided to give himself up. I thought if he could return the bank's money, maybe they wouldn't punish him quite so severely. He was only sixteen -and he did manage in some way to get the money from Bundy

"We were on our way to return it. Riding through a canyon, we saw we were going to meet two men He made me hide and then went on alone to see who they were

"It was horrible, Bendy They didn't give him a chance I saw it all Then they caught his horse and—I must have fainted and fallen from my horse then I don't remember anything after that till you found me I—"

Jack Bundy reached out a thin hand, caught her by the arm and twisted her around to face him.

"What happened to the money?" he rasped

She was too stunned at seeing him to speak. He shook her violently and repeated the question.

"The money was in Floyd's saddlebag," she said. "The men took the horse, so—"

"Look!" old Alf Bigmun cut in, pointing at the window. "Are they the men?"

"Yes," Sunday said in a frightened whisper.

Turning to the window, Bendy saw Lou Fowler and Harv Hawley easing along the side of the horse barn, their sixguns drawn and ready for business.

Right then, he guessed how it must have happened in the canyon—the deputy recognizing Floyd Adams from his picture on a wanted dodger, shooting the kid down, finding the money. Of course, it was the money that had made Lou and Harv decide to keep the kid's death a secret. Didn't have any idea that the girl had seen them do the shooting.

So they'd buried the kid, hoping no one would ever discover the killing, knowing if Jack Bundy learned of it, he'd come gunning for them and the money. Everything would have worked out fine, too, if it hadn't been for old Brush Buzz—and if the girl hadn't recovered her memory when she did.

"Remember we got to find out from them where the money is," Jack Bundy said to his partner.

"One can talk as well as two," Fats Ford returned grimly.

Crouching, he leveled his gun and fired through the doorway. Lou Fowler staggered, fell forward and lay still. Ford's second shot caught Harv Hawley in the thigh and sent him reeling empty handed against the barn.

Grinning, the outlaw started to straighten. But he never quite made it, for at that moment, Nuisance sank his teeth in the man's fat left leg and Uncle Alf hit him over the head with a chair. Taking advantage of the confusion, Bendy lunged at Jack Bundy.

It wasn't much of a fight, for Uncle Alf ruined a second chair over Bundy's bony head.

The outlaws hog-tied and helpless, Bendy and Uncle Alf went out to take a look at the other two sidewinders. The deputy was dead. Harv was alive, but he sat with his back against the barn, looking mighty sick.

"Sure," Harv admitted, "I know where that money is. Lou and me split it fifty-fifty. My half's at home. Lou's is stuck away in his office. Now, how about taking me to old Doc Long for some relief from this pain . . ."

Once things had kind of calmed down, Bendy didn't waste no time. He led the girl they'd called Sunday into an empty room of the old ranch house, shut the door firmly—wasn't even going to let Nuisance come in and watch—and took the girl in his arms.

She wasn't a very big armful, and the top of her head hardly came to the top button on his shirt. But she was the only girl for him, and that's exactly what he told her.

"If you're sure, Bendy," she whispered

Benson "Bendy" Bigmun had the right answer. A kiss. He tipped her face up and settled the whole business once and for all with the kind of a kiss that didn't leave no room for doubts in her mind. ● ● ●

TOUGH ROAD to

THE DAY'S last waning light showed a creek-bank tangle ahead, the thick growth fringing some nameless, sand-choked stream trickling south toward the Canadian. Tim Coby approached it at a wary pace, cocked Winchester balanced across saddlehorn, his finger tight on its trigger, twin Colts snugged against his thighs, wearing two crossed shell-belts, all loops filled with brass.

A hundred miles yet to Red River—not that crossing into Texas would gain him sanctuary from those who had trailed him south out of Abilene. He had a notion they would dog him as long as there was a chance to grab him. But Texas was his country and he knew it well. He didn't know this wild outlaw territory with its maze of dim, twisting trails that seemed to lead nowhere, that piled up the odds against him in the deadly game his pursuers had forced Tim Coby to play.

His horse scented water and tried to go into a trot. Tim held the animal down. "Easy," he said. "We'll both drink in a minute, but after we're sure no reception committee is waiting."

Then he snorted, remembering he had once told a puncher that when a man started talking to his horse it was time to find a woman and hunt a parson.

Well—with a sour glance back at his pack-mule, thinking of the blue dress he had bought at Abilene for Miss Principia Acton—he had once known where to find the woman. But he had waited too long.

Miss Principia, who owned the best half

When Tim found Roxy, prettier than a sunrise, warm as a sunset, he could hardly remember tall, bony Miss Principia

TEXAS

By
FRANK
P.
CASTLE

Tim could see the picture—some man at day's end finding Roxy waiting for him . . .

of Kentville, the town closest to his Double C spread, had almost showed a tear in a cool gray eye when he rode off to Abilene, four months ago. It had kept him hopeful. Then a letter had arrived for him the day he started home again—a stiff, formal letter having to do with her share of the herd he had trailed to Kansas—and signed Mrs. George Piersall.

Piersall was a fat, asthmatic joker whom Tim had never counted as competition at all.

A rifle whanged, quarteringly to his left in that creek tangle, and a bullet burned the breeze so close to Tim Coby's face he could almost see it.

He snapped up the Winchester and hammered a slug back. He sank spurs deep and ran hard for the nearest trees. He heard a high-pitched yell and saw powderflame spit out of gathering shadows; he slammed another bullet back. Somewhere nearby a big gun, maybe a Sharp's, joined the chorus. Tim spilled from saddle and went headlong into thick brush, with lead from the first rifle chasing him.

He had been afraid they would get out in front and wait, and it looked like they had.

By this time, after three narrow escapes from that bunch, he knew some of them. There was a big beefy fellow named Beeber that he had seen holding up a number of bars in Abilene, and a wild kid with tow-colored hair whose face he had branded with a bullet two days back, when they had come closest to catching him. Another one was swarthy and wore a steepled hat, maybe an Indian or squaw man. There might be a fourth, though he wasn't sure.

They thought he was carrying twenty thousand dollars south with him to Texas. And—he had regretted this a hundred times—they were absolutely right.

HE WRIGGLED through brush on his belly, thorns scratching him, dust sifting into his eyes and nose, and came out on a narrow shelving bank above the water. There was a long quiet pool here, showing a gentle drift of cottonwood pods and dead leaves. Upstream, on this side, he saw a pile of debris left by some past flood, with what looked like a heap of old clothes nearby.

Something stirred with a crackling rustle. He listened intently, and heard what sounded like hard breathing, the irritable mutter of a voice, coming from beyond that pile-up. No sign of life at all, elsewhere; he felt puzzled. Four of them, if his guess was right—why didn't they close in and try to knock him off?

Then it came to him that maybe there weren't four here—maybe two, or even only one, separated from the others. Tim Coby's long jaw tightened. He was heartily sick of this deadly game of hide-and-seek; if that bunch had split up, he was going to cut down the segment here, right now. He eased the Winchester around and sighted on the pile-up; he slammed a bullet into it.

A high yell sounded, then a rush of sulphurous language that would have held a muleskinner spellbound. Tim blinked; he wouldn't have thought the twoheaded kid was quite as old as the shrill voice indicated. He saw a flash of something white, darting from the pile-up among the trees. Across the creek, that Sharp's roared again, and Tim's hat was snatched off his head, with a hole in its crown almost as big as his fist.

He hit the brush again like a jack rabbit, his insides knotted. A couple of inches lower and he would now be without a face. But he had them spotted—two of that killer gang, one on this side, the other over yonder. He went at a reckless, careening run after the one here.

Footsteps pattered hurriedly ahead of him. Bare feet—this was queer. He dodged between the thickly clustered cottonwoods, heading upstream, swore at the rake of a hackberry hedge, and smashed furiously through the trailing tendrils of wild grapes.

A flash of vivid red, in hurried movement, showed before him. Tim hurdled a jackstraw pile of driftwood—and got his hand on somebody.

It was a figure that twisted in his grip. Long nails raked across his face. He dropped his rifle and grappled with both hands, and realized belatedly he had made a bad mistake. But his impetus carried both of them headlong in a jarring, twisting fall. They rolled off the creek bank into the shallow stream.

Tim hit on his face and came up gasping,

shaking his head, trying to get a better look at his improbable catch. He had a momentary impression of a mop of tawny hair, of flaring eyes and red lips skinned back from even white teeth as harsh words were hurled at him again; then a small fist hit his eye, and he saw stars.

"Wait!" Tim yelled. "Stop it!"

The girl who was sharing eight or ten inches of tepid water with him swung again. Knuckles skidded off his cheek. He grabbed hold of her once more, pinning her arms until he could scramble to his feet.

"Confound it, let up!" Tim said. "Shouldn't have handled you so rough, and I'm sorry. But you shot at me—"

"You're darned right I shot at you!" she cried. "I'll burn powder every time I see anybody riding at me when I'm trying to get out a wash, not dressed for visitors, you all gun-hung and with a rifle trigger-fingered. And don't think you got the upper hand on me yet! I can still handle you!"

She started to rise, tempestuously, bit her lip and sat down again, pulling knees against her chest and hugging them. Her attire consisted of long-handled red underwear; now soggy, it hugged her notable figure rather tightly.

Tim looked away from her. He cleared his throat, remembering those old clothes back by the pile-up, also the flash of white he had seen. It looked like he had put in an appearance at the worst possible time for her, a moment when she hadn't even had on the red underwear. She must have carried the suit with her, struggling into it as she ran.

"I sure apologize," he said. "And if there's anything I can do—"

"You can get to blazes out of here!" she said. "For your own sake, you'd better skedaddle fast, too; Gramps is mighty touchy about men bothering me!" He can pop a squirrel's head at a sight of distance. I'll take your apology—and you move. Dust!"

Tim remembered the way his hat had been hit, and looked hurriedly around, with the feeling that this was no place for him to be, at all. In a situation like this, he could be killed by whoever counted himself the girl's protector before he could say a word in his own defense. People in this county notoriously shot first and checked up afterwards.

Then he saw what must be Gramps, on the other bank, a gnarled little crabapple of a man, showing a fantastic flare of white hair and whiskers, cat-stepping out of the brush, lifting his rifle and swinging its big octagonal muzzle to center exactly on Tim Coby.

"You danged woman-meddler!" the old man said, in a deep, brassy bellow. "I'm going to blow your guts right through your backbone!"

THERE was an appalling sincerity in that tough declaration. He meant to kill, and no doubt about it. Tim thought of his Colts, but they were wet; anyway, trying to draw would be suicide. If he made any move at all, the old rifleman would probably pull trigger.

It was a hell of a thing; he had had to scratch like sin, since he was old enough to remember, finding his feet and staying on them in a tough world. Now, when he was solidly set and ready to build himself big—discounting those killers on his trail catching up with him—he faced a senseless death in this wild corner of nowhere. A kind of thing to make men snicker, if it was ever known—caught bothering a woman.

Then the girl came scrambling up in a wild flurry of motion, and threw herself at him, arms whipping about his neck and hugging him tightly.

"Stop it!" she yelled, over her shoulder. "You shoot him, you've got to shoot me, too!"

"You crazy female!" the old man screamed, in that voice like a bull-moose bellow. "You know I got this gun set so light a whisper'd trigger it! Get away from him!"

"I won't!" the girl said, and stamped her foot. "He spoke up nice, said he was sorry. There's no cause to kill him—"

"I see cause enough, right now!"

"I'm not moving," she said, "until you put your gun down. Darn you, Gramps, do it! He won't mean us any hurt!"

The old man swore in lurid frustration, but lowered his rifle. He came off the bank with a springy leap that gave the lie to his white hair, and splashed across the creek. The girl let go of Tim; she went up the near

bank at a furious run, in among the trees.

"I'm Gramps Watkins," the old man announced. He spit tobacco juice without taking cold blue eyes off Tim. "The gal's name is Roxy, short for Roxana—kind of a high-toned name, and don't get notions she ain't high-toned enough to wear it. Who're you and what's your business here?"

Tim told him. Gramps Watkins listened, still longingly fingering the trigger of his big rifle. "Well," he decided, "maybe you're sure enough a cowman heading home to Texas after delivering a herd in Kansas, and maybe you ain't. If you are, we'll count kind of friendly-like the bullets that got slung. If you ain't—or if you try any fiddle-faddle with the gal—I'll still put daylight through you. Now, we got our camp down-creek a mile; we'll pick up your stock and head there. You want to share grub with us, you're welcome—I never turn anybody away hungry. . . ."

"I'M A TRADER," Gramps announced, indicating a couple of ratty-looking light wagons at the camp. "Most lunkheads think this is empty country, but I do plenty good. Injun trade—Choctaws, Osages, Cherokees, Kiowas; I know 'em all You take a buck with some furs stashed away. I wave gew-gaws under his squaw's nose, and pretty quick the furs belong to me."

The smell from bubbling kettles was enticing, but Tim said, "I'd better push on; could make trouble for you people if I stay here long. I figured to keep going and try to make Porter's post, at the bluff crossing of the Canadian, before stopping."

Gramps snorted. "You're pointed wrong for Porter's; besides, your animals need rest and graze. Trouble, huh? What kind?"

"Three jokers, maybe four, have got their sights notched for me. They've been on my trail ever since Abilene—think I've got something they want. They'll kill me to grab it."

"Yeah? That sounds like money, to me."

Tim stood silent. The old man chuckled, eyes brightly gleaming as he shaved a twist of black tobacco and stuffed the shavings into his mouth. "Figured that cowman-heading-home yarn of yours didn't quite jibe with all the brass and iron you're packing, but now it does. It has to be money; you're taking home what your herd brought you, in cash. And don't look slantways at me—I don't want it! You got the stuff well hid?"

"I think so," Tim said reluctantly.

"Keno!" Gramps said. "If they come calling here, I'll sure help you discourage them! Go peg your stock, now, and figure to night with us. Maybe four of them, huh? Danged if I don't hope they will come along—ain't had any trouble of my own for too long a spell. . . ."

When he came back from taking care of his animals, Tim found the girl had returned from the creek. Now she wore butternut breeches, cowhide boots, a duck jacket over a wool shirt. She had turned silent and distant, darted one look at him and then busied herself with supper.

He supposed she felt embarrassment at the way they had met. Oddly, he found such remembering pleasant, himself—discovered he was measuring her against Miss Principia and not feeling quite so bad about Miss Principia getting married before he could return to claim her. Tim had been too busy to pay much heed to women; remembering this tawny-haired girl in her red underwear suddenly sharpened the fact that Miss Principia was undeniably rather tall and bony.

He hadn't tasted hot food for some days, and stuffed himself outrageously on Roxy's squirrel stew and fluffy biscuits, with boiled coffee just the way he liked it. Afterwards he smoked a cigarette, and prowled around, looking and listening. The night was quiet and very dark. He came back to find Roxy washing dishes, and offered to help, got a curt refusal.

It made Tim feel a little cast down. Then he snorted at himself. Come morning, he'd never see her again. The girl finished her chores and disappeared, probably into one of the wagons.

Tim smoked another cigarette. Across the fire from him Gramps dozed, big rifle cradled in his arms, his snore a violent brassy sound. Tim grinned, remembering the scare the old goat had put into him, back at the creek. For all his spryness, he was probably nothing but bluff and bluster. Come trouble, Tim

thought, he'd sooner rely on a chipmunk to back him up. Some guardian angel must be watching this oddly mismatched pair in their ramblings around the wild territory.

The girl's voice, tense and excited, reached him. "Mister!"

He sprang up and went to her, hand on gun until he saw that she was bent over his mule pack, holding a lantern.

He had dumped the pack carelessly, rawhiding himself again for loading up with presents for everybody he knew in Texas. Dragging the mule along when danger hounded him at every step had been foolishness of a high order, but he was stubbornly unable to cut the animal and its burden loose.

Now he saw the pack had sprung open. A fold of blue velvet was sticking out; Roxy's hand was hesitantly fondling it.

"This is the most beautiful color I ever saw!" she breathed. "It's a—a dress?"

"Yes." He bent and pulled the garment out, shaking it, half a notion in him to hang it up for the night, let it air.

Roxy rose to her feet, watching. There was a look on her face like a kid's on Christmas morning.

Some abrupt impulse out of nowhere made Tim thrust the dress at her. "Here. Try it on, if you like."

Long-handled underwear hugged her tightly; Tim cleared his throat

"Would I! Golly!" She grabbed the dress from him and was gone at a run.

Tim walked back to the fire, feeling amused for a moment, then doubtful. Maybe handing her that dress would be like sticking a plug hat on an Indian—she'd likely pull it on wrong side to, maybe drag it in the dirt. He wasn't rightly sure what he would do with the dress, home in Texas, but he hadn't hauled it this far to be misused by that wild girl. He wished now he'd told her to stay out of his pack.

Soon he heard her coming back, and faced around. Surprise hammered through him.

SHE WAS about the prettiest thing he had ever seen. That dress hugged Roxy as though it had been made for her. Skimpy about the top, it revealed most of her arms and shoulders, warmly marbled by the firelight. She twirled about, showing the incongruous sight of her cowhide boots—also a flash of bare legs as the skirt, carefully lifted from the dust, flared.

"I can't come any closer," she said. "I didn't have the right fixings to put on underneath, and I couldn't wear my long johns with it—"

This was fairly evident to him. There was a tightness in Tim's throat; he had suddenly come up short of breath.

A cameo at her throat, hung on a black ribbon, caught his attention. Roxy touched it. "This belonged to my mother; Gramps saved it for me. It's all I have to remember her. Do—do you think it's all right to wear with the dress?"

"It's fine," Tim said gruffly. "You look just right. I wish now I'd brought along some slippers, too, and—er—fixings—"

He took a step toward her, another. Roxy, eyes enormous but steady, studied him gravely, and she did not back away. The world seemed abruptly to have narrowed down to just the two of them, and this moment. All sorts of strange emotions were stirring in Tim Coby.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Gramps come awake and to his feet in one swift, pantherish movement. "Varmints!" the old man said, and went away from the fire in a blur of motion.

Roxy ran toward a wagon, skirt caught high. She snatched up her rifle, a Spencer, and started coming back.

Tim bent to grab his Winchester. A gun blasted, out in the night, and a skillet spun away from the fire with a clatter, a hole in it. There was a wolfish, high-pitched yell: "It's him, Beeb!"

An answering roar from Beeber: "Drive the son my way! Don't let him get free!"

Roxy had disappeared. Tim ran past the wagons, heading for creek timber. He had just reached it when somebody jumped him, from the side.

There was a stinking reek of sweat and bad breath in his nostrils. A bony fist clipped his jaw and staggered him for a moment. An arm whipped about his neck and tightened, throttling. "Beeb!" It was a triumphant, guttural shout. "I've got him!"

The Sharp's deep boom sounded. Guns seemed to be crashing everywhere. Tim put all he had into a violent twist that brought him around to face his attacker; he lifted a knee mercilessly. There was a squall of pain, but the man was tough—he hung on, stabbing brutal fingers at Tim's eyes. Tim arched backward, bucking himself clear, an effort that landed him on his spine in the dust. Something grazed his temple, painfully—a stamping moccasin aimed at his face, he realized.

He managed to clear one of his Colts, and fired up at the dark figure above him. It was, he thought dismally, a miss. Then a cottonwood seemed to come down with a shuddering crash on his head.

TIM COBY groped for consciousness again like a man fighting his way up from the bottom of a dark river. Some monstrously heavy weight was hampering him; he struggled against it, flailing out with both arms. A voice told him to be still; hands touched his face and he slapped at them.

"Stop for a minute, darn you, and I'll get him off!" Roxy cried.

He saw starshine overhead, a lacy filigree etched against the black sky by branches and leaves. Roxy was kneeling beside him, struggling to roll off the body of that fellow who had jumped him, sprawled now atop Tim.

He muttered, "You get him?"

"No; you did! You fired twice, and I think the second shot did it. I wasn't far away, tried to get my sight on him, but was afraid of hitting you—"

Tim grunted. He had no remembrance of a second shot; must have fired by reflex action after taking this dead man's heel in his face. He felt as though as he had been kicked by a wild bronc.

The guns had stopped their shattering debate. "They pulled out," Roxy whispered. "Or backed off, anyway; they didn't bargain for what they got!"

Tim nodded in sober agreement. An old man and a girl—that bunch must have been rudely surprised by the violence of their reaction. He scratched a match, quickly cupping it in his hand, for a look at the one here. It was the fellow of the steepled hat and the braids, as dead as he would ever be.

"Why, that's Si Pocock!" the girl exclaimed. "He had an Osage wife, but there'll be no mourning in his soddy; he was a mean man."

Tim was staring at her. The front of her dress had been torn. There was a livid scratch marring pale flesh. "One of those devils laid hands on you!" he said harshly.

She bit her lip and ducked her head, hastily pulling together the torn strips. "He was the one who was sorry for it; I barrel-whipped him, right in the face. B-but I'm sick about what happened to the dress. This isn't all—I hit a mud-hole and spattered it, too."

He didn't give a damn about the dress, was a little surprised at the shaky relief he felt she hadn't been worse misused. Tim turned toward camp. "Why in the devil didn't I ride on, instead of dragging you and the old man into this?"

"Who did any dragging?" Roxy snapped. "You'd be a danged sight worse off by now if we hadn't lent a hand—" Then her voice altered. "What's happened, at camp?"

There was only darkness ahead; the fire had disappeared. They went forward cautiously, were halted by a rasping whisper that could have been heard a quarter of a mile. "Who be ye? Speak up, or I'll— Oh!" A hand fastened like a steel clamp on Tim's arm. "I tallied me one, a rat-eyed fellow with face kind of stove in. How'd you do, boy?"

"I got one," Tim said. So the odds had been cut considerably—and the dog who had mauled Roxy had been dealt out. He added, "Why did you douse the fire?"

"We got to haul out of here, that's why," Gramps said. "Those tough-nuts backed off for a palaver, but they'll sure as heck come at us again."

"Only two of them left," Tim objected, with the thought that he would as soon stay here and let them come on, finish this up now.

"Three; I saw 'em plain," Gramps told him. "You either miscounted or they picked up some extra help."

"We'll do no running!" Roxy snapped. "We handled them once, and we'll do it again! Three of them? Well, there's three of us—"

"Wrong, honey. Only two; I stopped a hunk of lead—" Gramps crumpled quietly to the ground.

Roxy dropped to her knees beside him, her voice suddenly frantic: "Gramps! Don't leave me—"

"Stop yammering, gal!" Gramps Watkins said testily. "An old rip like me, I'm still gristle; I can't be hurt by any bullet that don't hit me dead center. Anyway, I got to stay alive long enough to see you with your own man—" His weakening voice trailed off.

They carried him to the wagons. Tim lifted him into one of the rigs and, while Roxy made him comfortable, went for the animals, hurrying them back to harness up. Now the odds had tilted again. Alone, he would have waited for those three, but he couldn't risk a girl and a hurt old man. Roxy came with the lantern to give him some light, shielding it with a shawl, chewing her lip in anguish.

"He's been good to me," she whispered. "He brought me up, taught me to act and think right. He never hunted a fight, but he never backed off from one and now here he is hurt and—"

"We'll get him clear," Tim said. "You know this country?"

ROXY nodded jerkily. "Yes. I'll take the lead. You follow along with the other rig. We'll head for Porter's, on the Canadian; Porter is good at doctoring."

Tim tied his horse on behind. There was no time to bother with the mule. He let it go, and went forward for one more word with Roxy. "Move as fast as you can push your team. If you hear me shoot, that'll mean those devils are catching up on us; pour leather and run for it. I'll stop and try to hold them off."

"I'll do what Gramps would do; you stop, I stop," Roxy said, and shook out her reins. The wagon lurched forward.

Tim kept the noses of his pair against the tilt of Roxy's rig, watching behind almost as much as he did ahead. Beeber and those with him would follow along fast when they charged the camp again and found it deserted, he thought grimly. But if Roxy could move fast enough across this dark, rolling country, and those killers didn't know the dim trails she was following, there was an outside chance of evading them.

Roxy was rolling plenty fast. The wagons lurched and shuddered as she went straight down a long slope and hit the clustering timber at another creek. Branches slashed the canvas, trunks battered the wheels. The horses squealed, protesting against such rough going. She led Tim Coby down the creek bed, with a constant crack of leather to hold the animals at a near gallop, to avoid being slowed and mired by sand. Showering spray drenched Tim. Then they hit a steep upward pitch, leaving the creek; he wondered that horses and wagons could take such punishment.

Running in the creek had been smart, though; if Beeber tried to follow them by sign, that should slow him up, maybe throw him off entirely.

The pace settled to a steady grind, up a fold of land, down the far side; wherever timber and brush appeared, Roxy swerved to crash through. Judging by the stars, she was heading almost straight south. Also by them, it was well past midnight when she halted at last for a breather.

Tim stiffly stepped away, stamping wooden feet. Roxy had disappeared under her tilt. She came out again. He said, "How is the old fellow?"

"N-not so good," she whispered. "It's that bullet, I think; it's got to come out, right now—"

He grunted, uncomfortably shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Roxy waited a moment for him to speak, then turned toward the wagon again. "You can hold the lantern for me. I'll do it—"

"No." He reached out to stop her. "Never tried anything of the kind, but I'll do my best. Get me a knife, while I build a fire."

He heated the blade in the flame, let it cool a little, and climbed into the wagon. Roxy already had the old man stripped to the waist. The bullet had hit just under his ribs, on the left side. Tim braced himself and set to work.

Time seemed to stretch out interminably, while he fumbled for that chunk of lead. If Beeber and his bunch came along, Tim knew, he wouldn't have a chance to get away. He put this thought out of his mind.

Roxy, beside him, was the color of gray slate, and her breathing was a ragged, tearing sound, but the lantern in her hand was steady, unwavering. Her danger was as great as his own—those of the breed hunting him wouldn't be likely to treat her with any gentleness, especially after her part in the fight back yonder. But she was standing up to this ordeal; so could he.

Gramps' eyes flicked open, once. His lips moved, a faint gritty whisper: "Give me something to chew on."

Tim Coby thumbed a bullet from a belt loop and put it between the old man's teeth, and there was a crunching sound for a while before he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

Somehow, Tim did it—got the slug out, the wound cleansed, and a bandage in place, made of strips of a shirt torn up for him by Roxy. Maybe the rough surgery helped; the old man seemed to rest easier, with his breathing less thready. At the finish, Tim carefully retrieved his bullet, restoring the shell to its belt-loop.

The night was beginning to break when he stepped down into the open again, rolling and lighting a cigarette, sucking smoke deep into his lungs. There was deep quiet in this

lonely land, with no sound of pursuit. The gamble, if it could be called that, of hauling Gramps back from the grave had paid off. Tim was glad now he had made the effort; he was a little humbled by the old man's grit. He'd never again make the mistake of down-rating anybody.

Roxy left the wagon, too, and stood watching him silently for a moment, hugging herself, perhaps conscious again of the torn dress she still wore and of the unavoidable display of more of herself than was proper, there in the wagon. Tim felt angry at himself for remembering; still, he was human enough to have noticed, and he knew he wouldn't forget.

Suddenly Roxy came to him, with a rush. Her cheek was against his chest, her hands gripping him fiercely, while she shook with silent sobs. He held her close, gently patting her shoulder.

It lasted only a moment. Then she stepped back, dabbing at her cheeks, chin firming resolutely. "Only a ninny bawls; Gramps has told me that a thousand times. We'll go on, now. I'll try to make it to the Canadian, if the horses hold out . . . And, Mister—"

"Yes?" Tim Coby said.

"I guess I owe you a lot," Roxy said quietly. "More than I can ever pay. But if there's any way to do it . . . any way at all—I will."

HE AWOKE along in the shank of the afternoon, next day, feeling confusion and some anger. He said, "Why in blazes did you let me sleep? Why didn't you wake me and get some rest yourself?"

"Why, I wasn't sleepy, and I could tell you haven't been getting much rest lately," Roxy said. "Besides, it's been quiet."

The wagons were in a thick patch of timber, with the Canadian yonder, a turgid brown stream snaking back and forth through a sandy bed a quarter of a mile wide. They had made it this far, shortly after daylight, and the weary animals had forced them to a halt. Tim had hidden the wagons in as deep cover as he could find and had staked the horses to graze downstream a little, while Roxy looked to the old man. Coming back, he had sat down to rest a bit. This was the next thing of which he was aware

"How's Gramps?" he asked.

"Pert," Roxy answered. "I fed him some broth a while ago, he cussed me some because I wouldn't let him get up and stir around; then he went back to sleep. I—I think he'll be all right."

She was back in breeches and shirt again, had repaired and cleaned the blue dress. Roxy shook it out for his inspection, and Tim was surprised by the cleverness of her work

"Why, I'm handy at such chores," Roxy said. "Gramps taught me. He vowed when I was little that I was going to learn the things to make me a lady. I guess I learned how to handle a gun better than anything else, but I tried to become ladylike, even if it's kind of hard in country like this."

"Gramps is a pretty old man; tough as he is, he won't be around always," Tim said. "After he—leaves you, what are you going to do?"

Roxy put chin in hand, frowning. "Gramps says the right man will come along one of these days and I'll marry him, but the only men I see are mostly a kind I wouldn't want any closer than a mile up-wind. I'm sharp at trade . . . maybe I'll just keep hauling gewgaws to the Indians."

Tim grunted. Gramps Watkins's kind of trade was near its end; this wild territory was going to be settled, and soon. She would probably wind up, he thought, as the woman of some soddy squatter turning quickly slattern and drab. The thought put a sour taste in his mouth.

Roxy briskly changed the subject, then, turning to something that had obviously been too long pent in her: "Listen, what was that ruckus last night all about, anyway? Why are those fellows so hot on your trail?"

He remembered that he had told Gramps, but not her. "Simple," Tim said. "I've got some money, and they want it"

She was immediately interested. "Much money?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

Roxy's eyes widened and her lips parted in astonishment. "Golly! Did you hold up a

bank—or was it a train?"

Tim grinned, amused. "Would it make any difference to you if I had?"

She considered this question soberly. "Gramps says to have no truck with thieves—but I can tell you're no thief. Anyway, if you were there'd be lawmen after you, and those last night weren't lawmen; they were killers. You must have got the money honest."

"I sold a herd of cattle in Kansas," Tim said. "Part of it was mine. My friends and neighbors owned the rest. Usually, in a sale like that, you mail a bank draft home to Texas, but your home bank discounts it, which trims the sum down quite a bit. I figured to save that, also to ride home in a hurry and surprise my friends by putting cash in their hands. I've wished plenty of times since starting south that I hadn't tried it that way!"

Roxy turned her head toward his mule pack, just under the tilt of one of the wagons, where he had thrown it last night. Her glance slanted back to him. He grinned again. She was trying to guess where he was carrying that money.

Roxy wrinkled her nose at him. "It isn't in that pack, the way you treat it so careless; you haven't got any saddlebags, and I opened up your bedroll to spread a blanket over you, so I know it isn't there, either. If you were carrying it in a pocket, it'd make a bulge, and you aren't bulgy. Where in tarnation is the money?"

Tim said, "Maybe it's best for you not to know . . . Now you've got the dress fixed up so nice, maybe you'd like to wear it again?"

She sped excitedly away with the garment, like a girl with her first doll. And yet it was more than that, Tim realized; Roxy was satisfying a deep hunger, probably long hidden under a tough manner and hard talk, to fix herself up, to be pretty and womanly.

TIM THOUGHT about this, frowning, as he took a look through the timber. The whole country was somnolent in this late afternoon heat. Downstream he glimpsed the horses, full-bellied and dozing. Give them another hour's rest, he thought, and they'd hitch up, move out; it was five hours or so to Porter's trading post, at the bluff crossing of the Canadian. They could make it before midnight.

The herd had crossed at Porter's, coming north, and he knew the country on down to Red River. A long day's ride would put him in Gainesville, where he had plenty of friends. He'd rest and visit and see if Beeber and his bunch tried to follow him into Texas. Then a couple of days more, and he would be home on the Brazos.

And Roxy—where would she be, tomorrow and next week and the years ahead? He tried to avoid this question, but it nagged at him

He heard a sound like a cracking stick, back among the trees, and whirled toward it, gun flashing into hand. But the sound was not repeated and a jay scolded him; he relaxed.

Then his attention was drawn to Roxy, by the wagons. She had put on the blue dress again, and was obviously engaged in play-acting that she was a grand lady at a ball, doing a graceful waltz step with the skirt swirling, then executing a grave curtsy to her partner. She flourished an imaginary fan, and engaged in animated conversation, and swung into a spirited polka.

She was a pretty good dancer, Tim realized. Where had she learned those steps? By pressing her nose against a window at officers' club dances in lonely Army posts, likely; dances weren't held anywhere else, in this country. No Indian trader's granddaughter would ever be invited to them.

Tim started walking toward her, drawn by the same impulse as last night—and with an added spur. He was remembering the words she had spoken after his rough surgery on the old man. Their meaning had seemed pretty clear.

Well—why not? It would ease the soreness put in him by the loss of Miss Principia.

He stopped a couple of paces from her. Not until then did Roxy become aware of him. She gasped and faltered in her make-believe, going back a step. "I—I didn't know you were watching."

Tim took another stride, too. He put out his hand and touched her shoulder. It felt

silken. There was a faint tremor under his fingers.

Roxy looked down, fingers working at a fold of the skirt. It made a pleasant rustling sound. "I feel like somebody, now," she whispered. "I've got a dress of my own, but it's old and ugly, almost worn out. I don't like to wear it. But this—this makes me feel like a lady. Who'd you get it for? Your wife, maybe? Or a sister?"

She was so pretty, with the sun full on her, that it put an ache in his throat. He couldn't seem to take his hand away—but he felt steadier. He knew now he could never go through with the treacherous notion that had been in his head a moment ago.

Why, this was the kind of girl any man not completely loco would count himself lucky to have as a partner. There in the shimmering sunlight Tim could make out the picture—some man coming home at day's end to a house warmed and brightened by her presence. Roxy would be waiting, looking even more like a lady than she did now, in the blue dress—looking like a wife. But then the thought of some other man's going home to Roxy stirred a little gust of anger in him.

"I've no wife, no sister, no kin at all," he said. "I bought it for a lady in Texas . A—friend of mine. But—"

He was about to add it wasn't going to Texas; it was going to stay here, a present to the girl wearing it. But Roxy's head snapped up. Her eyes were blazing, her mouth quivering. She interrupted him: "I've been praying you wouldn't have a wife. But—a friend? I know enough that no man buys a dress like this for just a friend! You let me wear it! You put your hand on me!"

Tim stared at her, confused, not understanding at all this sudden flare of wild emotion. He saw it die as quickly as it had blazed up, saw all of her high spirit run out of the girl. She swayed toward him, eyes dead-looking. The gesture said plainly that he could go ahead and she wouldn't object.

He thrust her roughly away. "Go take it off! Get ready to help me hitch up; we're hauling out of here just as quick as we can roll!"

Roxy fled from him. She scrambled into the wagon where Gramps Watkins lay. Tim heard her sobbing, with no heed now for the old man's admonition about ninnies.

He chewed his lip, took a step toward the wagon, and stopped. Enough of this, he told himself bitterly. He wasn't going to try finding out what had riled her so. The quicker they parted, the better.

Then he tensed. Something warned him that the situation in this quiet, sleepy camp had abruptly changed. The sun still shone brightly and a hot breeze was rising, but there was coldness along his backbone. He dropped a hand toward his right-hand gun.

"Don't do it!" a voice said behind him. A high, almost falsetto voice, and Tim knew its owner. "Get your hands out wide—fast, you Texas dog! Now, turn around. Slow and easy!"

It was the kid with the tallow hair, showing an evil face with a raw mark where Tim Coby's bullet had scorched it three days ago. He had a gun in his fist, jiggling impatiently. "Beeb," he said, mouthing the words over his shoulder without taking his eyes from Tim, "let me blast his guts!"

The big, tough leader of these killers, Beeber, came through the trees. "Don't be so damned impatient, Kid."

He kept walking, stopping when he came to Tim. A third man had also appeared, a nondescript fellow with a hatchet face, who was now moving at a hurried trot toward the wagons.

Beeber showed a wicked grin, thick lips skinning back from mottled teeth. "You gave us quite a run, bucko. We had a hell of a time today picking up the trail you blotted in that creek. The boys wanted to jump you when we first came along, but I said the way you're so straight and fast on the shoot we'd wait a bit, that you'd get too interested in that brindle-topped girl to notice anything. And you did! Now—"

His knotted fist flashed at Tim's face, a punch too short and quick to dodge. Tim landed crashingly on his back. Through the wild ringing in his head he heard Beeber's next words dimly: ". . . you'll give up that money easy, or you'll do it hard, but we're taking it!"

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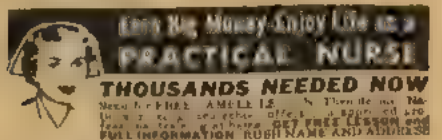

BEEBER gripped Tim Coby's jacket and hauled him to his feet. Tim pretended to be nearly out, letting his head loll as he tried to sneak a hand to a gun. Beeber grinned and slapped the hand aside. "I knew all the tricks before you were a pup. Play like a statue, or next time I'll shuck your front teeth."

The big man lifted both of Tim's Colts and punched out their loads, cartridges cascading about his boots. He threw the gun into the dirt, near the fire, then unsnapped the shell-belts and tossed them aside, also. "You sure packed all that brass along for nothing! Now, boy, we'll get down to business. Where's the cash you're carrying?"

Tim didn't answer. He heard Roxy cry out angrily at the wagon, and turned his head in that direction. Beeber wiped knuckles across his mouth in a back-handed slap. "Think I was joking about those teeth? Pay attention, bucko. You've run before us enough to have likely tried some clever way to hide that money. I don't think it's on you, but I'll look, just to make sure—"

He searched Tim swiftly, thoroughly, found his wallet and thumbed a hundred dollars from it, cramming this into his own pocket.

"So much for that. And I'm not taking the time to tear everything apart, hunting the rest; I'm in a hurry to begin spending those dollars. Start talking!"

The tallow-haired youth giggled eagerly. "Let me stick a bullet in him, Beeb, some place where it'll loosen his tongue!"

"Suppose you bust an artery, and he bleeds to death quick on us? No. You watch me, and you'll learn how to do this." To Tim, Beeber added: "That's Lobo Kid—new at this game, and kind of impulsive. Kid, fetch me a burning stick from the fire yonder."

This was something monstrous, unbelievable, here in the bright sunlight. That third fellow was dragging Roxy from a wagon; she was fighting him. Lobo Kid grabbed both of Tim's arms and locked them from behind; he had hulking size, in spite of his squeaky voice. Beeber clamped Tim's right hand in an iron grip, lifting it.

"Never met a man yet who wouldn't sing any tune you called if you used this on him—" The fire kissed Tim's fingers.

He sucked in his breath as pain streaked through him, clamped his teeth tightly as Beeber played the flame over his flesh again.

"Don't be a fool," Beeber advised, "or you'll wind up wearing a claw where this hand is."

Lobo Kid giggled in Tim's ear. Tim fought against him, bucking away from the fire. This brought him around to face Roxy, just as she was shoved, falling hard in the dirt almost at his feet She still wore the blue dress. The man who had shoved her showed a clawed face.

"Lick, she marked you!" Beeber laughed.

"Yeah!" This Lick, a gangling, ugly fellow, wiped his face, glaring at Roxy. The dress had been torn down the front again; creamy skin made a dazzling display in the hot sun. "The old man's in that wagon—dead, from the looks of him. Hustle it, Beeb; I want time to teach this gal some manners."

The fire came at Tim again, too fast for him to evade it. Beeber's face wrinkled in mock sympathy. "You've proved you've got guts, bucko. Now, talk!"

Tim Coby's jaw was rigid with strain. Talk? It might gain him a moment's respite—until the money was found. Then a bullet in his head, he thought, and probably something unspeakable for Roxy. He had to keep a tight tongue and hope for another way out. But it had to come in this next second, he couldn't take that fire again.

Then Roxy came up from the ground, leaping at Beeber, grabbing an arm with both hands, ducking her head to sink teeth into it.

Beeber swore vitriolically, with a furious lash of his arm that flung her away and into the dirt again. He bent, whipping a thin-bladed knife from his boot; his face was mottled with rage. "You need trimming down, you hellcat!"

TIM TIGHTENED every muscle he owned and uncoiled them with a violent snap, lunging backward against Lobo Kid.

[Turn page]

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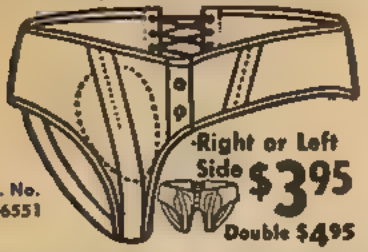

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He broke the hulking youth's grip on him and twisted, circling a waist with both arms, lifting, jerking Lobo Kid's boots clear of the ground. He went with the direction of his thrust, turning; he threw Lobo Kid bodily at Beeber.

There was a crash of collision, a shrill inhuman scream. Lick drew, laggingly; he triggered a wild shot at Tim, who had pitched sideways, was now rolling and scrambling through the sand. He grabbed up one of his empty guns, wincing at the pain in his scorched fingers, and with his left hand scooped three of the loose, spilled shells, all he could reach. He kept going, gained his feet and headed for the trees.

There were two guns roaring, sand-spouts around him, a buzz of lead in his ear. He swerved at a meager stand of brush, crashed through it, then whipped back and bellied down, ramming in one of the shells he had grabbed up, with a fierce hope sand wouldn't foul the barrel.

It fired all right, and he scored a hit on Beeber—but glancingly, in the leg, not enough to drop the man or even hinder him. Beeber dropped an empty gun and lifted a full one. Tim used his second bullet, and missed with it.

One load left. He felt two swift strikes, one tugging cloth at his right shoulder, the other an inch lower, finding flesh. It hurt—but after that bath of fire the pain felt mild.

Still, his right hand, already bad enough, was now too numb to use. He started to shift his gun to his left hand, and caught a glimpse of that other fellow, Lick, coming at him from the side.

Then Tim saw Roxy again. Behind Beeber, she had grabbed Tim's other Colt and was plucking shells from one of the belts. He opened his mouth to yell that what she was trying was useless. Lick put a bullet against a muscle ridge in his left arm.

It knocked Tim's gun into the dirt. He scrabbled frantically to lift it again. Beeber, almost on him now, tilted his gun down to kill, and missed, lead whipping the brush under Tim's nose.

Gramps Watkin's big Sharp's suddenly crashed like the crack of doom. Its heavy slug slammed Lick sideways, smashed him

flat. Roxy pulled trigger at Beeber from behind. There was a dim pop of sound, then a furious ineffectual hammer-snapping.

Beeber had paused for a bare moment, startled, for an involuntary glance around. Roxy screamed something and hurled the useless gun at him. He snorted and turned again to Tim, who had his Colt unsteadily in both hands now, trying to brace it. Beeber's lips writhed; he fired, and sand spouted in Tim's eyes, blinding him. Tim swung the Colt's muzzle and loosed his last shot without seeing his target.

Silence, then, with echoes dying. Tim rubbed at his eyes, blinking hard to clear them. Roxy came into the brush at a run, bending to help him up. He shook his head, and rose unaided. Beeber was face down and still. Yonder by the fire, Lobo Kid looked up at the sun with unseeing eyes, Beeber's knife deep in his chest. He had hurtled right into it when Tim had thrown him at Beeber.

"DANG THOSE misfiring shells of yours!" Roxy cried. "I'd have tallied him sure, with honest lead! You're hit!"

"Just dusted a little; I'm all right. And you cost me a thousand dollars, the shell you popped; that's where I put the money, wadded up and rammed into the cartridge cases of that belt. Thought I got all the powder out, so they wouldn't fire, but I was sure wrong about that one, at least."

Roxy made a startled, contrite sound. He grinned. "That's all right; you gave me a piece of time I needed pretty bad to pick up my gun, making him look back. No money I'll ever own will be spent better!"

Then he put out his hand to her; he couldn't help it. It rested for a moment against quivering warmth and softness. For to be all right, this time. Then Roxy looked a second he thought everything was going down at herself and her face changed color. He didn't know whether it was the dress, remindful of their spat a few minutes ago, or the fact so much of her was once more visible. She struck his hand aside. "No, you don't! We're quits, now—and don't you ever touch me again!"

[Turn page]

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She ran from him. Tim had a look at Beeber and Lick, then walked over to Gramps's wagon. Gramps was sitting up, muttering angrily. "Should have got 'em both, and quicker, but it took me so danged long to load, after the yowling woke me up. And this gun was heavy as sin when I tried to switch targets. Potting that skunk was the tonic I needed, though: I'll be out for supper vittles!"

"Guess you will; you're a tough old coot," Tim said morosely. "And your granddaughter sure takes after you—"

Gramps glared at him. "Roxy tough? Maybe that's why she was bawling her eyes out, just a while ago! You're savvy when it comes to fight, but mighty thick-headed about women. You haul out the prettiest dress she ever saw, and invite her to wear it. You put your hands on her, and she's got notions of bliss. Then she finds out the dress is for some female you've already bespoken in Texas—"

"I'm not bespoken!" Tim said heatedly.

"Whyn't you tell her so, then?" Gramps yelled boomingly. "Whyn't you let her know there ain't nobody waiting with any claim on you?"

"I will!" Tim shouted back. "And if she raises her hand at me again, I—I'll—"

Then he wondered why they were yelling, looked around and saw Roxy, not a dozen feet away, back in breeches and shirt. That conniving old man had known all the time she was there.

Tim took a step toward her, another. She flew into his arms. She kissed him as though she never wanted to stop. It seemed to fit his mood, also.

"Fiddle-faddle!" Gramps Watkins snorted. "Danged if it won't be good to hit the trail alone again!"

"The only trail you're hitting is home with us," Tim told him. Then, grinning down at Roxy, "As for you, honey, you're going to have a closetful of dresses—"

She shook her head at this. "I'll fix the blue one again; that'll be enough. There'll be other uses for your money. You and me, we're going to rise high in this world!"

Danged if they wouldn't, Tim Coby thought. ● ● ●

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